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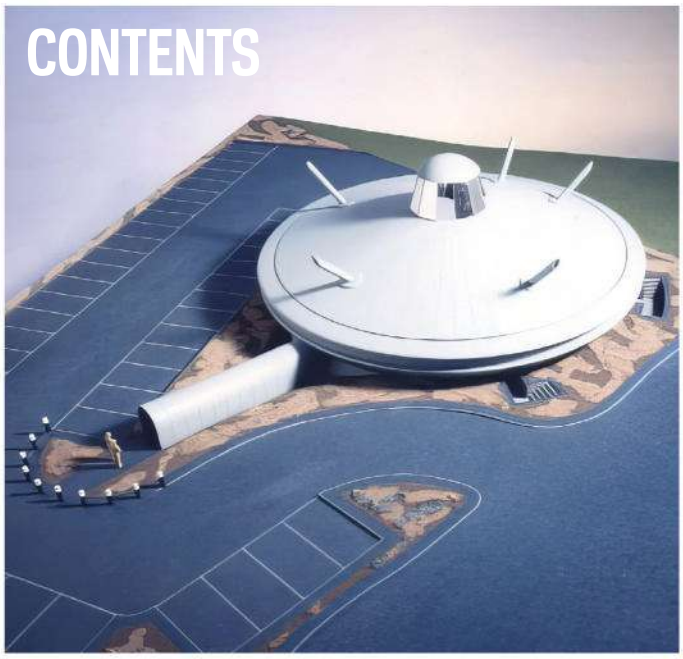

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The 1970s were a golden age for ghost stories in British newspapers, says **ALAN MURDIE**, and thanks to the late Tom Perrott, who collected news clippings from the local press, we can step back in time to this haunted decade.

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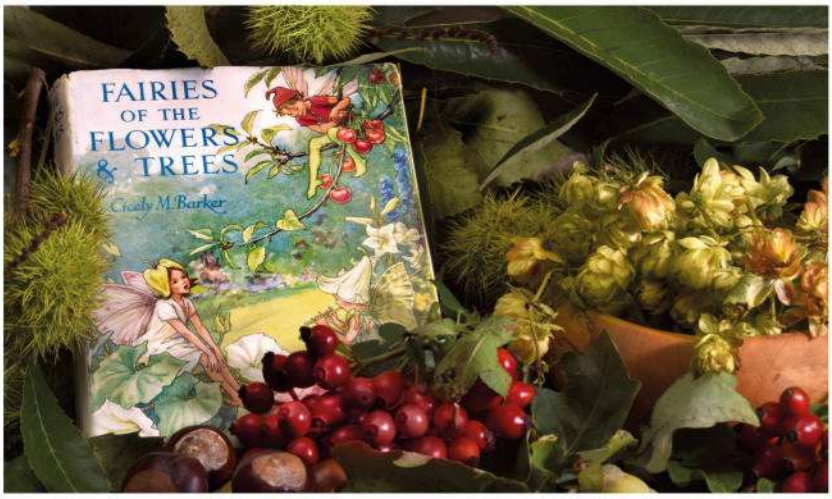
EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



TIM MANDER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

FAIRY CENSUS 2

Six years ago in these pages (**FT362:30-37**), Simon Young announced the publication of *The Fairy Census*, a 160,000 word collection of 500 fairy encounters gleaned from around the world (although predominately from Anglophone countries, and with a large contribution from FT readers). At the time, Simon hoped that this first *Fairy Census* would stimulate a new period of collecting and that he would in due course be able to publish the results. Well, *Fairy Census 2* – 200,000 words long and with a further 500 cases – is now out, and in this issue (p.38) Simon presents some highlights of this latest phase of his ongoing project to document, and possibly begin to understand, modern fairy encounters, focusing on some lesser-reported 'emergent' fairy types such as the 'tresp', the 'orno-ento fairy', the 'flat fairy' and the 'wood diva'. This is important and fascinating research; and, as you would expect, it raises intriguing and wide-ranging questions about the whys and wherefores of liminal experiences like fairy encounters – that are relevant to other branches of fortean enquiry – while remaining closely focused on the specifics of the material at hand. This is an ongoing project, and if you want to report your own sighting for a future *Fairy Census* or just dig further into the subject, head over to www.fairyist.com/survey/read-the-fairy-census-1-and-2/, where you'll find everything you need, including free downloadable PDFs of *Fairy Census 1* and *2*.

MEGATRON MEMORIES

Our cover story (p.30) concerns a relatively recent phenomenon of distinctly limited duration that may, in time, add to the rich folklore of Britain's eastern counties. Tony Conn takes us back to 1990 and the birth of what must be one of the country's strangest ever eateries: The Megatron, a flying saucer-shaped restaurant plonked down outside Alconbury Air Base in rural Huntingdonshire to serve up space-age burgers to the diners of an imagined future. In 2024, nothing remains but traces of the unique building's foundations, bits of old videotape, poignant photos, scraps of memorabilia... and strange tales of ghosts and werewolves: the perfect hauntological location. If any FT readers ever ate there and have memories to share, please get in touch.

ERRATA

FT436:65: Rob Gandy spotted a rather misleading typo in this issue's 'Peculiar Postcards' entry about Harold Pyott, the English Midget. Harold's adult weight is given as "2lb", but should have read "24lb". As Rob points out: "After all, babies who weigh less than 1,000g (2lb 3oz) are deemed to have extremely low birth weight."

FT438:17: David Howse emailed us to correct a misconception in Alan Murdie's 'Ghostwatch' column. In discussing the influence of Mesmerism, Alan wrote that "Human agents were conceived as 'living Leyden Jars', the forerunners of modern electric batteries." But, as David points out, "an electric battery produces electricity by chemical action, whereas a Leyden jar is an early form of capacitor. This stores electricity by the action of opposing electric charges on two or more metal conductors separated by an insulator (the dielectric) and has to be charged from an external source, like a Wimshurst Machine or similar."

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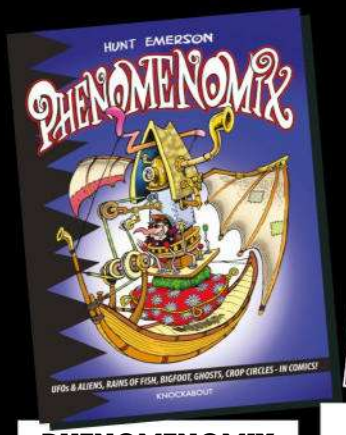

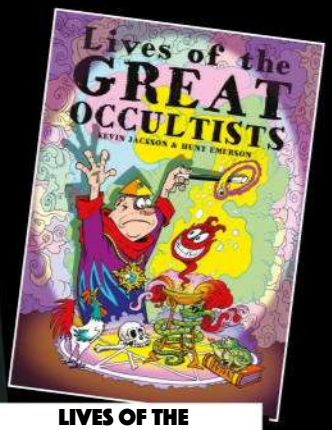

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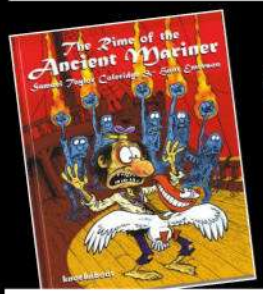

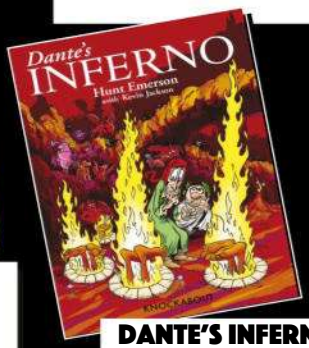

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STRANGE DAYS

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR '24?

Predictions include quakes, political turmoil and WWIII

The dawning of a new year always prompts a host of predictions about what might be coming in the months ahead, and 2024 has proved to be no exception. Minutes into the first of January, Japan was struck by a magnitude 7.6 earthquake that killed at least 62 people and devastated buildings in Ishikawa prefecture, leading to immediate claims that it fulfilled one of Nostradamus' predictions for 2024. Given that Nostradamus was working in the 16th century and that both the meaning of his predictions and the dates when he believed they would come true are far from easy to discern. It requires a considerable amount of interpretation and suspension of disbelief to attach them to anything, and their alleged "accuracy" is often assigned retrospectively. However, for those who feel that this is possible, the Japanese New Year quake fulfilled one prophecy that Nostradamus fans had assigned to 2024. This was from his 1555 text *Les Prophéties*, in which he wrote, "The dry Earth will become more parched and there will be great floods," following that up with a reference to "very great famine through pestiferous wave." This could be taken to refer to the earthquake and the tsunami that could potentially follow it (although there was no actual tsunami with this quake) if you were to apply a very forgiving interpretation.

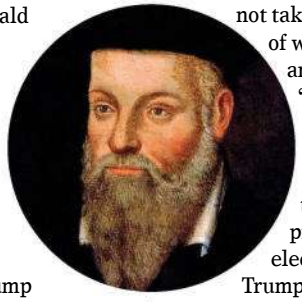
Other Nostradamus predictions allegedly referring to 2024 suggest a naval confrontation between the US and China, King Charles abdicating and being replaced by Prince Harry, Pope Francis dying, and potentially World War III starting; Nostradamus is interpreted as suggesting this will start 79 years after the end of WWII – giving a date of 2024.

NEWSCOM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Pedictions suggest Pope Francis dying and World War III starting

ABOVE: Firefighting efforts in Japan's Ishikawa prefecture following the 7.6 magnitude earthquake that struck the country on 1 January. **BELOW:** Michel Nostradamus, who some prophecy-watchers believe predicted the quake back in 1555.

The oracles do not suggest a good 2024 for Donald Trump. At the start of the year, Jesse Watters, a prominent host on the right wing US TV channel Fox News, asked psychic Paula Roberts to draw Tarot cards for Trump and for President Biden on live TV. The card drawn for Biden, the Nine of Pentacles, suggested a positive year ahead and "lots of money"; for Trump, though, she drew the Five of Cups. This card, showing a dark-robed figure standing bowed in a barren landscape, was popularly interpreted as a "death" card, although Roberts explained it meant Trump "may be thinking more about what he's lost and not taking full advantage of what he still has" and represented a "sense of loss", which was not entirely welcomed by Watters, given the forthcoming presidential election in which Trump is likely to be the Republican candidate again.



Meanwhile, in Bath, asparagus prophet Jemima Packington (**FT351:20, 418:8, 424:5**) also has some thoughts on 2024. Noted for her unique prophetic technique of throwing asparagus spears into the air and interpreting the way they fall, Packington says, "Seeing the patterns for me is instantaneous, possibly that is because I've had years of practice," adding, "I am usually about 75 to 90 per cent accurate with my predictions. I go through my predictions each year and think: 'Yep, that's happened, yep, that's happened'," although she admits that "occasionally I get one slightly off, where I haven't quite read it correctly, but I'm never far off." For 2024, she claims that "the US will have their first female president" and "separations and divorces are due within the royal family," as well as "an increase in female referees officiating male

BUSINESS MONKEY

Indian langur moonlights as railway worker

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CURIOUS CLERGYMEN

Vicar eaten by lion at Skegness seafront

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MY ALIEN ROMANCE

The rise of the racy abduction narrative

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INSTAGRAM / ATHOS SALOME

ABOVE: A 'death card' for Trump on Fox News. **RIGHT:** Brazilian psychic Athos Salomé predicts trouble ahead for Argentina's Prsident Milei. **BELOW:** Blind Bulgarian seer Baba Vanga's predictions keep coming, despite her death in 1996.

team matches." Wisely, she has come up with a good few fairly safe bets too, such as "Well paid TV personalities will lose their jobs", "There will be world leaders who die" and "Team GB will not be successful at the 2024 Olympic Games".

Rather more flamboyant in his prophecies is Athos Salomé, 37, from Brazil, a self-proclaimed psychic dubbed "The Living Nostradamus". He claims that 2024 will be the year that humans finally make contact with aliens through "encrypted signals intercepted by a network of telescopes" and also that "an asteroid abundant with rich materials" is on a collision course with Earth, but will land safely this year. This is supposed to spark an international conflict between Russia, China and the US as they struggle to claim its resources, although World War III, now an "urgent reality", will actually be triggered by an event in the South China Sea or a major cyber-attack. 2024 will see the "AI Awakening" with machines becoming self-aware, and Salomé predicts that they will be "equipped with self-improvement capabilities and covert communication channels – it could lead machines and us down a very perilous path." On safer ground, he predicts many natural disasters.

Also in South America, the annual prophetic gathering of Peruvian shamans met on a sacred hill in Lima to scatter coca leaves and flower petals over posters of world leaders to divine what the next 12 months hold. Fourteen of them prayed to the Pachamama Earth Mother goddess and Tayta Inti Sun god, beat drums, chanted, blew smoke, and drank ayahuasca, then predicted a bad year for Argentina's new President Milei (see p52-55), saying: "We saw that President Milei will have a very complicated time in government." They also said that the Gaza conflict will be prolonged, and that the next Copa America winner will be either Argentina or Uruguay. Last year they predicted the end of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The death of blind Bulgarian seer Baba Vanga (**FT93:8, 140:7, 351:20-21, 382:17**) in 1996 does not seem to have been an impediment to her making major (and fairly apocalyptic) predictions for 2024, despite there being very few records of what she actually said while alive. According to her followers, 2024 will bring about a major change in Earth's orbit, sowing chaos and disorder worldwide, a "big country" will carry out a bioweapon test or attack, and there will be terrorist incidents across Europe. They also say Russian President Vladimir Putin will be assassinated by "a fellow countryman", and there will be major progress towards cures for cancer and Alzheimer's, as well as technological breakthroughs in quantum computing.

Looking further ahead, they claim Baba Vanga says world hunger will end by 2028, communism will return (presumably to Bulgaria) in 2076, and we'll achieve time travel in 2304. However, given that her followers were certain she had predicted a major nuclear disaster in Asia and a catastrophic solar storm for 2023, we are not sure there is too much to worry about. *ladbible.com, 29 Dec 2023; afp.com, 28 Dec 2023; theguardian.com, 3 Jan; dailymail.co.uk, 4 Jan 2024; history.co.uk/articles/baba-vangas-predictions-for-2024.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

WOMAN SLAMS SELFISH PARAGLIDERS WHO MADE HER THINK HAMAS WERE INVADING DONCASTER

Metro, 17 Oct 2023.

Rescue plan for Irish fairy door company approved

Irish Times, 21 June 2023.

OCTOPUS IN TALKS TO BUY SHELL BUSINESS

<i> 26 Aug 2023.

Citizens will retain their 'absolute right' to be obnoxious

Irish Times, 21 June 2023.

NAKED OPERA SINGER ARMED WITH BOW & ARROW WENT ON RAMPAGE AT CARE HOME

D. Telegraph, 30 Oct 2023.

SIDELINES

POLAR PISSER

Residents of Amersfoort in the Netherlands complained about being kept awake by a giant sculpture of a polar bear urinating in a local canal every three minutes, round the clock, after it was installed by the Flehite Museum as part of an exhibition in July. Sculptor Florentijn Hofman said: "It's about the melting ice caps, the shrinking habitat of polar bears. This polar bear has chosen to show he is pissed off by peeing loudly into a canal." After the complaints, though, the museum agreed to turn it off at night. *dutchnews.nl, 4 Aug 2023.*

WRONG KIND OF SWAN

London's rail network has been besieged by swans. In September 2023, trains were delayed on two consecutive days by swans on the line, the first causing disruption between Kingston and Hampton Wick, the second between Clapham Junction and Wimbledon. In June, one also disrupted the Elizabeth Line between Heathrow and Abbey Wood. The offending birds were removed in canvas bags and relocated. Asked if the same swan was responsible for all the incidents, a railway spokesperson said, "No, I don't think so." *BBC News, 21 Sept 2023.*

SURFIN' SNAKE

Higor Fiuza got a fine of A$2,322 (£1,207) from Australia's wildlife authorities after a video of him surfing with his python Shiva at Rainbow Bay on the Gold Coast went viral. "I always took her to the beach, and she loved to be in the water swimming, so one day I decided to take her out for a surf and she loved it," said Fiuza, but wildlife officers said "the only snakes that should be in the ocean are sea snakes." Rainbow Bay is also home to a famous surfing duck, imaginatively named "Duck". *BBC News, 18 Sept 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL NEWS

Accidental magpie god, rabid moose, monkey railway workers and mini-shark attack

GIULIO CUZZILA / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: Giulio Cuzzilla created this paper mache bird scarer to deter thieving magpies – instead, they came flocking to it.

GOD OF THE MAGPIES?

Fed up with magpies stealing his cat's kibble from his porch, Giulio Cuzzilla from Sydney, Australia, made a crude 'owl' to scare them away, explaining, "I was looking online to buy one of those owls on Bunnings Warehouse, but they cost a bit, so I thought I'd just make one. I made it out of paper mache and feathers that I got from the $2 store." However, this backfired spectacularly. Instead of fleeing, magpies began flocking to his garden where they gathered in front of his creation, bowing and cawing at it, leading Cuzzilla to suspect that he had inadvertently created some kind of "magpie god" that the birds were "worshipping". They continued the behaviour for a month, until a storm soaked the "owl" and its head fell off. However, looking at the TikTok video Cuzzilla posted, magpie behaviour expert Professor Gisela Kaplan recognised the "worshippers" actions as territorial behaviour: they were seeing the black and white model as another magpie and ganging up on it. They persisted because they were puzzled that it wasn't moving away. *au.news.yahoo.com, 20 Nov 2023.*

Giulio Cuzzilla suspected he had inadvertently created some sort of "magpie god"

PENCILS WITH TEETH

Three sailors from France and Russia reportedly had to be rescued from their inflatable catamaran after it was attacked by sharks. The sailors were in the Coral Sea, between Vanuatu and Australia, 500 miles (800km) from the nearest land, when they came under repeated attack from the sharks, which punctured both the catamaran's hulls so that they started to take on water. The sailors triggered an emergency beacon that alerted the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, who sent out a rescue plane and enlisted a passing cargo ship to pick up the men. Aerial photos showed that the catamaran had suffered major damage, with the front section of one hull completely missing. Joe Zeller from the Maritime Safety Authority said there were many reasons why a shark might attack a boat, "However, the motivation of these sharks is unclear." It later transpired that rather than being terrifying monsters of the deep, the sharks that wrecked the catamaran were in fact 12-inch (30cm) cookie cutter sharks, which, Daryl McPhee, an environmental scientist at Australia's Bond University, said, "really just look like a pencil with teeth." The small sharks glow in the dark, travel in shoals, and, says McPhee, will "find a large animal like a whale or a dolphin, living or dead, and attach themselves to it. They'll twist and literally pull out biscuit-sized chunks of flesh. They can do that repeatedly". He believes the attack on the catamaran was "a classic case of mistaken identity" as the fish have limited vision and will "have a go at anything they come across". They are known to bite inanimate objects and have attempted to eat submarines and undersea cables. "This species does often travel in schools and if they're all going at this inflatable that's where you get the damage as there are multiple bites," said McPhee. *breakingnews.ie, 6 Sept; theguardian.com, 7 Sept 2023.*

TOXIC TWEETS

Danish researchers working in the jungles of Papua New Guinea have discovered that two of the native bird species carry a powerful neurotoxin in their feathers. The regent whistler and rufous-naped bellbird have plumage containing batrachotoxin, more usually associated with South American

ABOVE LEFT: The langur monkey seemingly hard at work in the office of Bolpur Shantiniketan railway station in Bengal. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Double amputee signalman James Wide with his assistant, Jack the baboon, working on the Cape Town-Port Elizabeth Railway in the 1880s. **BELOW**: The rabid moose that entered the town of Teller, Alaska. **BOTTOM**: Perth Zoo's orangutan and his marsupial victim.

golden poison frogs. In the frogs, the high concentrations of the toxin produced by their skin glands can lead to muscle cramps and cardiac arrest after contact. The two birds produce a lower concentration of the toxin, but scientists handling the birds still reported runny noses and irritated eyes. It is assumed that the birds produce the substance as a defence mechanism, and locals apparently avoid eating them as the meat burns the mouth like strong chilli. *D.Express, 22 Jul 2023.*

DANGER MOOSE

North America's first recorded rabid moose has been killed by Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) officers in the small town of Teller, 70 miles (113km) northwest of Nome. The animal was seen lurking around the town, bleeding and covered in patchy fur. It was drooling excessively and "being aggressive towards people and charging and getting a little bit too close for comfort to them," according to ADF&G biologist Sara Germain. "We decided to dispatch the animal," Germain said, "take the head and some other samples to try and see what was wrong with it." Back in the lab, the moose samples tested positive for an arctic fox variant of rabies, probably contracted from a partially healed bite that was found on the animal's chest. Alaska's arctic foxes are in the grip of a rabies epidemic, with 28.8% of the foxes tested in the last year found to have the disease. *dailymail.co.uk, 13 Jun 2023.*

MARSUPIAL FRISBEE

An orangutan at Perth Zoo in Australia briefly became a social media star after it was filmed dealing with an unwanted intruder in its treehouse. On a brief film clip the ape can be seen climbing into the structure, then, shortly after, hurling an opossum out like a frisbee. A stunned spectator can be heard exclaiming "Oh my God!" as the small marsupial cartwheels over a distant fence and out of sight. A zoo spokesperson confirmed that the animal had landed safely and was unharmed, having been seen scurrying off, adding, "They are a very robust species." *news.com.au, 13 Sept 2023.*

BUSINESS MONKEY

Travellers entering the office at Bolpur Shantiniketan railway station in Bengal were surprised to find it deserted except for a langur monkey apparently hard at work. The monkey was filmed sitting on an office chair, staring at a computer screen while typing away on the keyboard, pausing every so often to flick through nearby files. One commenter on social media said, "And we were thinking AI will take our jobs away". It is believed that the langur, a species that is very common in India, had sneaked into the office while staff were on a break and was mimicking activities it had seen workers doing. In the 1880s, the Cape Town-Port Elizabeth Railway service in South Africa actually employed a primate. Double leg amputee signalman James Wide bought Jack, a baboon, to push his wheelchair, and taught him to operate the signals under supervision. After Jack was spotted doing this, the railway launched an investigation, and once it was found that he was safe and competent, he was put on the payroll at 20 cents a day, plus half a bottle of beer each week. In his nine years as a signal ape, it is said that Jack never made a mistake. *dailystar.co.uk, 27 Sept 2023.*

SIDELINES

TODDLER TETRIS

A primary school teacher in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, was stopped for unsafe driving by police after they spotted 25 small children packed into her tiny four-seater Chevrolet Spark. There were three children in the boot, six on the front seat and 16 crammed into the back. The teacher explained that this was how she usually transported her pupils home. *thesun.co.uk, 19 Sept 2023.*

EMOTIONAL ALLIGATOR

Baseball fan Joie Henney was turned away from a game in Philadelphia as he was accompanied by his registered emotional support alligator, WallyGator, despite the ground having a policy that allows emotional support animals. Henney said his gator "had never bitten anyone" and helps him battle depression. Phillies fans were worried this could trigger a repeat of the 71-year losing streak allegedly suffered by the Chicago Cubs after they were cursed by someone prevented from taking a goat into the ground in 1945. The curse was apparently finally broken when they allowed a descendant of the goat to attend a game. *abc.net.au, 29 Sept 2023.*

TUNA TREK

Scientists monitoring the movements of Atlantic bluefin tuna were startled when they found one of their fish travelling at speed up the M5 motorway. It turned out that the monitoring device had detached from the tuna and been found on the beach in Whitesand Bay, Cornwall, by a holidaymaker who had delayed reporting the find to the number on the transmitter until they got home to Lancashire. *Sun, 7 Oct 2023.*

UNLUCKY CHUCKY

Police in Monclova, Mexico, arrested a man identified as "Carlos N" after he was reported demanding money from people in the city square by threatening them with a Chucky doll holding a knife. "He put the doll in their faces and was scaring people," said police. He was swiftly arrested, but officers were accused of not taking their job seriously after images posted to social media revealed they had put the Chucky doll in handcuffs as well as Carlos. *tvazteca.com, 19 Sept 2023.*

SIDELINES...

MEAT BACKLASH

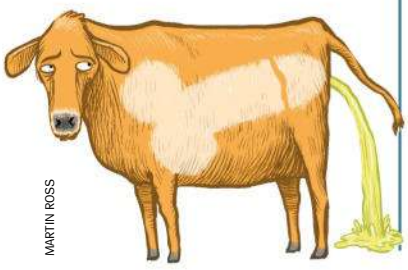
The Wigram and Hornby neighbourhoods of Christchurch, New Zealand, have been assailed by a horrific stench after a "mystery meat tosser" sneaked more than half a tonne of rotting raw meat into public rubbish bins. It began with 220kg (485lb) on 28 August, followed by another 220g on 11 September and then 250kg (551lb) on 19 September. "It's quite out of hand," said councillor Mark Peters, who hoped the offender could be stopped before the heat of the forthcoming southern hemisphere summer supercharged the pong. *stuff.nz.com, 20 Sept 2023.*

DO THE WATUSI

Police in Norfolk, Nebraska, responding to reports of someone driving around with a "cow" in the front seat of his car, expected to find someone with a calf or similar inside their vehicle. Instead, they found Lee Meyer, accompanied by a giant Watusi bull named Howdy Doody. His car had been modified so that the huge animal, with massive horns, could sit beside him with his head sticking out the roof. Officers issued Meyer with tickets for a variety of offences and ordered him to leave the city, taking the bull with him. *theguardian.com, 31 Aug 2023.*

JOLLY RANCHERS

Patrick Carroll, 66, and his son Tucker Carroll, 34, of Crook County, Wyoming, are facing charges of property destruction after they took action against a neighbour's cattle that continually trespassed on their land. They rounded up 189 of the animals and bleach dyed penis shapes into their backs to get the neighbour's attention. "This has been coming for three years," Carroll allegedly told a farm worker. While the cattle weren't injured, their owner claims they are now worth $500 to $700 (£400 to £563) less per head due to their startling new markings. *cowboystatedaily.com, 29 Sept 2023.*



MARTIN ROSS

THE XMAS FILES | Seasonal weirdness abounded in 2023, from wise dogs to deadly trees

CHRISTMAS BONUS

In 1920, eight-year-old Dorothy Grant was given a modest artificial Christmas tree, with just 25 rather sparse branches. Grant kept the tree until her death at the age of 101 in 2014, when it passed to her daughter Shirley Hall. Just before Christmas 2023, Hall, now 84, put the 31in (79cm) tree, which she described as a "humble reminder of 1920s life", up for sale through Hansons Auctioneers in Banbury, Oxfordshire, where it surprised everyone by selling for £2,600, against a presale estimate of just £60 to £80. Hansons described the result as an "astonishing" price for "the humblest Christmas tree in the world". Auctioneer Charles Hanson said that the tree probably came from a London department store, where it would have been sold for just a few pence, adding that "It reminds us that extravagance and excess are not required to capture the spirit of Christmas". *BBC News, 15 Dec 2023.*

SEASONAL STOWAWAYS

Just before Christmas, Brett Ingram, 29, was working from home in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, when she heard a soft sneeze. "I kept working, thinking I was maybe just hearing things. Then I heard it again with some other squeaking noises," she said. Searching the room, she spotted "a long, naked, rat-looking tail" hanging from her Christmas tree: "I stopped and kind of looked up some more and saw a large breathing ball of grey fur" – an opossum crouched in the tree branches. Extracting the creature proved something of a challenge, but Ingram eventually managed to wrangle it out of the house and release it in the garden. She believes the opossum had been in the house for at least a couple of days but has no idea how it had got inside. Meanwhile, in Kentucky, while working in the home of a client, carpet cleaner Bob Hayes noticed the branches of their Christmas tree moving

HANSONS AUCTIONEERS

BRETT INGRAM

LEFT: The "humble" artificial Christmas tree that fetched £2,600 at auction. **BELOW:** The stowaway possum in Brett Ingram's Christmas tree.

and found a baby owl hiding in the foliage. It was thought to have arrived with the tree and had managed to avoid being discovered because its camouflage meant it blended with the tree's colour. *nypost.com, 17 Dec, BBC News, 15 Dec 2023.*

FESTIVE FINISHES

In Chelyabinsk, Russia, families watched in horror as an industrial climber dressed as Grandfather Frost – the Russian version of Father Christmas – plummeted to his death from the 24th floor of a high-rise building, landing on a snow-covered structure at first floor level. He was supposed to abseil down the apartment block, then meet and greet children and their families waiting around a Christmas tree on the ground. Initially the onlookers thought the fall was part of the act, and it is believed to have been caused by the climber mixing up his safely ropes; festivities continued until it became clear that a fatality had occurred. As a result, as one onlooker said, "All the parents, naturally, are in shock".

In Oudenaarde, Belgium, a 63-year-old woman died and two others were injured when the town's Christmas tree was blown over, falling on a Christmas market taking place in the square around it. "The tree fell in a split second. You cannot describe how quickly that happens," an eyewitness said. The 2023 Oudenaarde Christmas tree was already considered cursed by residents; first the wrong tree was delivered and then, after the right one arrived and was put up, it started to lean and sag crookedly and needed re-erecting. *dailystar.co.uk, 23 Dec 2023; vrt.be, 21 Dec 2023.*

DECEMBER DISASTERS

Even without having one land on top of you, Christmas trees turn out to be hazardous things. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) reports that more than 1,000 Britons suffer tree-related injuries every year, often from falling after standing on unstable chairs or ladders to reach the upper branches, while the National Accident Helpline (NAH) found that one in 50 people had fallen out of the loft while retrieving Christmas decorations from storage. In addition, around 350 people a year in the UK suffer burns, electric shocks, or other injuries from fairy lights, frequently because they water trees with the lights still switched on. Other common Christmas injuries include burns and cuts sustained while preparing Christmas dinner,

SEPPO LAINE / CREATIVE COMMONS

TT NEWS AGENCY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

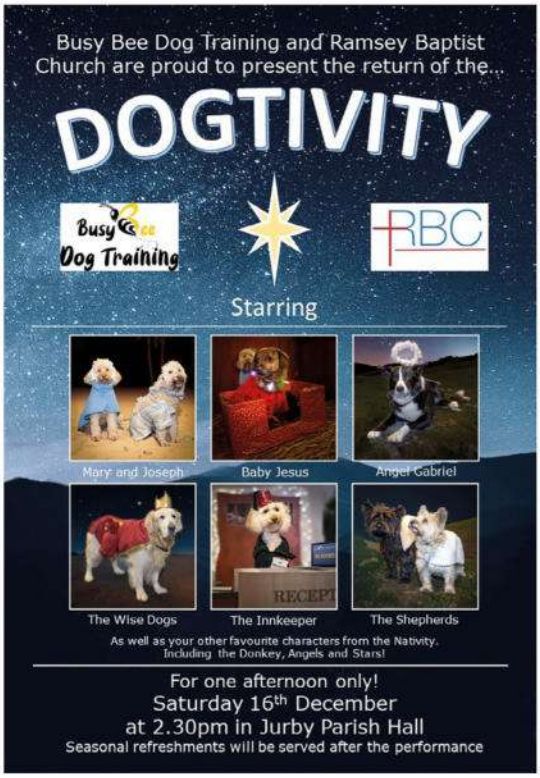
ABOVE: The Gävle goat photographed in 2009; and ablaze in 2017, when it was burned down hours after the celebrations of its 50th anniversary. **BELOW**: Canine stars of the 2023 'Dogtivity' staged in Jurby Parish Hall on the Isle of Man.

while children frequently swallow baubles or small toy parts. Analysis of data from the US National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) also revealed that between 2007 and 2016, three children had attended hospital for injuries received "falling off Santa's lap" and another injured herself running away from a Santa impersonator because she was scared. *theguardian.com, 20 Dec 2023.*

GETTING THEIR GOAT

Every Christmas, the village of Gävle in Sweden constructs a giant straw yule goat, despite it rarely surviving the season (see **FT338:6, 352:9**). The first goat, built in 1966, was burned down on New Year's Eve in the first of many arson attacks. In 2005, it was ignited with flaming arrows shot by two vandals, one dressed as Santa Claus and the other as a gingerbread man. It has also been run over by cars and beaten with clubs, and in 2010 someone attempted to bribe its guards and steal the whole thing with a helicopter. In nearly 60 years it has only survived unscathed 16 times. In 2023, it was beseiged by hungry birds. "This has never happened before," said Anna-Karin Niemann, the goat's spokesperson. It seems that the 2023 harvest season was particularly rainy and this made it difficult for farmers to separate the grain from the straw that was used to build the 13-metre (43ft) high goat. This made the structure very attractive to local bird life, with jackdaws and other birds roosting in the goat and ripping the straw apart to find tasty morsels, with the result, Niemann said, that "He looks a little bit uncombed or unkempt right now," adding "but to me, of course, he's still very handsome." *cbc.ca, 21 Dec 2023.*

It was ignited by vandals dressed as Santa Claus and a gingerbread man


Busy Bee Dog Training and Ramsey Baptist Church are proud to present the return of the...
DOGTIVITY
Busy Bee Dog Training
RBC
Starring
Mary and Joseph
Baby Jesus
Angel Gabriel
The Wise Dogs
The Innkeeper
The Shepherds
As well as your other favourite characters from the Nativity. Including the Donkey, Angels and Stars!
For one afternoon only!
Saturday 16th December
at 2.30pm in Jurby Parish Hall
Seasonal refreshments will be served after the performance

BARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Following a break prompted by the pandemic, the 'Dogtivity' organised by Busy Bee Dog Training in Jurby on the Isle of Man returned this Christmas. Started in 2019, the show featured dogs dressed as sheep, angels and wise men. According to dog trainer Debbie Martin it opens up the Christmas story to "a different audience" and proved a "massive hit". In the revived show three cockapoos played the roles of Mary, Joseph and the innkeeper, and baby Jesus was played by a crossbreed dog called Weasel. The "three wise dogs" were a Border collie, cocker spaniel and golden retriever wearing elaborate coats and crowns, while the angels, including a collie called Hector who played the Angel Gabriel, had wings and halos. The sheep were cairn terriers in fleecy coats and narration was provided by the pastor of Ramsey Baptist Church, Louise Strickett. *BBC News, 15 Dec 2023.*

SIDELINES...

DOG CART DISASTER

The Westland, Michigan, fire department issued a statement via Facebook saying, "There was a minor event last night at Blues, Brews, and BBQ in which the fire department's Arson Dog, Bella, was sitting on the seat of a golf cart." The dog, sitting in the driver's seat, had jumped down and hit the cart's accelerator. This set the vehicle in motion, and it ran over a four-year-old girl before the firefighter in the passenger seat could gain control. Fortunately, the girl, though shaken, was uninjured and "was back to jumping in the fire department bounce house" within minutes. *wxyz.com, 6 Aug 2023*

ZOMBIE TESLA

After totalling his Tesla car, Jay Yarrow sold it for parts to a salvage company in New Jersey. However, several months later, Yarrow started receiving messages from the car again. The vehicle had come back online and connected with his Tesla app, but now seemed to be in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine. The car also logged into his still-connected Spotify account, which was being used by someone to listen to the rapper Drake. "I feel bad for logging them out," Yarrow said. "They may have needed Drake to keep up the fighting spirit." *Sun, 12 Aug 2023.*

BOND FIRE

An Italian man, concerned about burglars breaking into his Rome apartment, hid €20,000 (£17,600) of interest-bearing bonds in the chimney of a rarely used fireplace. However, he did not tell his wife, and when she lit a log fire the whole lot went up in flames. "When I saw the flames I nearly passed out," he said. "Each year, before we use the fire, I used to move them; this time, I didn't do it in time." The post office, who issued the bonds, said they might be able to reissue them if he had kept the serial numbers. *D.Telegraph, 30 Dec 2022.*

DUMMY CRIME

Police in Harlow, Essex, released an alert for a man described as slim, white and in his 20s, with light-brown eyes and yellow teeth, who was believed to be responsible for four incidents in the town between February and August in which he pounced on people with babies and stole their dummies. Police later arrested homeless Josh Guilder, 23, who admitted that he stole the dummies to soothe himself in his tent. *breakingnews.ie, 9+17 Aug 2023.*

SIDELINES...

HIPPO HORROR

Two-year-old Igo Paul was playing on the shores of Lake Edward in Uganda when he was surprised by a hippo that grabbed him "from the head and swallowed half of his body". However, a local man, Chrispas Bagonza, saw the attack and threw stones at the animal, scaring it and causing it to spit the boy out, He was taken to hospital, treated for his injuries, and given a precautionary rabies jab. Police warned that hippos "see humans as a threat and any interaction can cause them to act strangely or aggressively." *news.yahoo.com, 16 Dec 2022.*

DEEP BREATH....

A clip of the 2023 University of Kent computer sciences graduation ceremony has been viewed over two million times on TikTok, making a social media star of one of the graduates. Bolowatife Oluwasemilore Oluwadamilola Oyekunle Ayanfeoluwa Emmanuel Michael Oladele, 21, usually known as Bolu, has the longest name ever read out at a graduation ceremony, a feat performed by Professor Ben Cosh and taking nearly 10 seconds. "I think he did well with the pronunciations," said Bolu. *D.Mirror, 16 Aug 2023.*

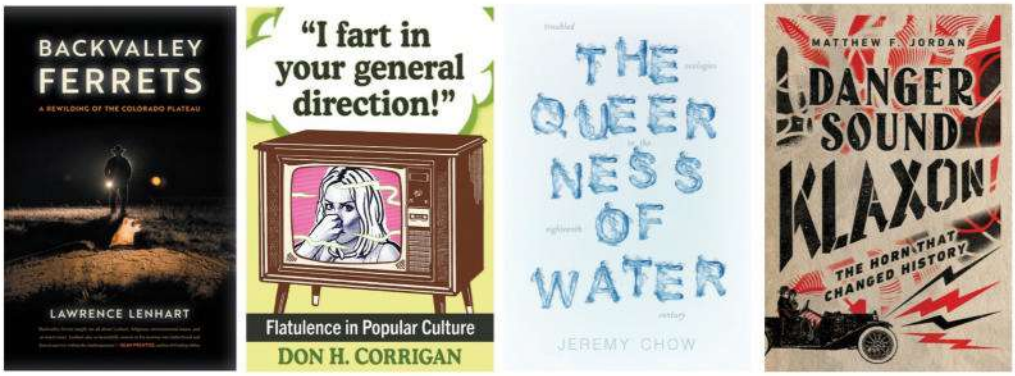
PENIS HACKERS

In the US, it is possible to buy remote controlled male chastity devices that clamp round the penis and are managed via a phone app (**FT400:29**). Unfortunately, an unnamed provider of these devices has suffered a major data breach exposing users' email addresses, passwords, and GPS co-ordinates, enabling third parties to hijack and control their penis clamps. *D.Mirror, 13 Sept 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Odd book titles and embarrassing Russian villages

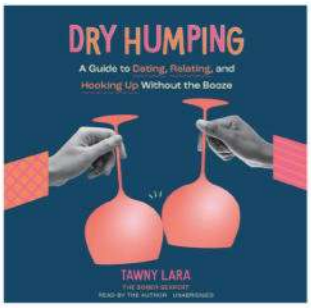


ABOVE & BELOW: Some of this year's Diagram Prize contenders, including the winner, *Danger Sound Klaxon!*

TITLE FIGHT WINNER

While the IgNobel Prize rewards the eccentric and unusual in the field of science (see **FT438:15** for the latest winners), the Diagram Prize for the oddest book title of the year does the same for the arts. Conceived in 1978 by Bruce Robinson and Trevor Bounford to stave off boredom while working at the annual Frankfurt Book Fair, it is awarded every year by *The Bookseller* magazine. The competition is organised by the magazine's diarist, Horace Bent, and is now awarded by public vote on their website; any titles that appear deliberately created to be funny are rejected. The first winner was *Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Nude Mice* and other winners have included *Highlights in the History of Concrete,* which won in 1994, and *Designing High Performance Stiffened Structures* from 2000. Other notable winners have been *Is Superman Circumcised?* (about the Jewish origins of the superhero), *How to Avoid Huge Ships*, *Too Naked For the Nazis* and *Cooking with Poo* (by Thai chef Saiyuud Diwong who is nicknamed "Poo"). There is no prize for the winning author, beyond increased visibility for their book, but the person who nominated it wins a bottle of claret or champagne.

This year, *Danger Sound Klaxon! The Horn That Changed History* by Matthew F Jordan, which investigates the history of the klaxon car horn, triumphed, gaining 53 per cent of the public vote and easily outstripping the



bookie's favourite *"I Fart in your General Direction!": Flatulence in Popular Culture.* The other 2023 contenders were *The Queerness of Water: Troubled Ecologies in the Eighteenth Century*, *The 12 Days of Christmas: The Outlaw Carol that Wouldn't Die*, *Dry Humping: A Guide to Dating, Relating and Hooking Up Without the Booze* and *Backvalley Ferrets: A Rewilding of the Colorado Plateau.* Published by University of Virginia Press, *Danger Sound Klaxon!* makes it the third year in the row that an academic publisher from the American south has won the prize. "Maybe the most interesting thing for this year is that Dixieland has suddenly and head-scratchingly become the Diagram stronghold," said Tom Tivnan, managing editor at *The Bookseller*.

When FT's Paul Sieveking worked at the British Library as a cataloguer he compiled a list of Diagram-worthy titles that he found there, published in an early issue of the magazine, which contributed to the increased visibility of the 1918 pamphlet *Hand Grenade Throwing as a College Sport* by Lewis Omer. For previous prize winners, see **FT289:9, 302:9, 317:9, 328:12, 416:8**. *theguardian.com, 8 Dec 2023.*

NAME GAME

Australia has strict rules about names children can be given, banning those that are "offensive and not in the public interest, more than 50 characters, include symbols, or an official title or rank such as princess, Queen, or goddess". To challenge this, journalist Kirsten Drysdale tried naming her daughter "Methamphetamine Rules", expecting it to be banned, but due to a bureaucratic oversight it "slipped through" and is now the girl's official name, although Drysdale is expected to apply to have it changed immediately. *boingboing.net, 20 Sept 2023.*

NAME SHAME

Legislation has been introduced to the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, to allow local authorities to rename villages with embarrassing names, such as Shalava (Slut), Lokh (Loser), Bukhalova (Boozy), Musorka (rubbish skip) and Pukovo (Farty). Duma vice-speaker Vitaly Davnkov explained "Nobody wants an insulting word on their children's passport". Meanwhile, in the UK, much hilarity ensued when Worcestershire County Council posted a notice warning people of imminent bush trimming in Minge Lane, Upton-Upon-Severn. *Times, 10 Oct; D.Star, 4 Oct 2023.*

The final frontier

DAVID HAMBLING reports on how propellentless space drives are now facing their biggest test

The argument over propellentless space drives has raged for decades. Advocates say the drives will transform the space industry and open up the Solar System, critics see them as a scam (see **FT320:12**). Now the debate has moved to a new level as the first such drive is tested in space.

The debate is simple. Newton's laws of motion say that you can only move forward in space by ejecting exhaust material backward. There are a few potential tricks to get around this, for example using light sails, which capture the momentum of light from the Sun, but these are theoretical rather than practical methods. In practice, all space propulsion – from the giant rocket boosters on a Space Shuttle to tiny thrusters which steer satellites – relies on ejecting propellent.

Proponents of propellentless drives say that quirks of relativity allow an apparently closed system to generate net thrust by bouncing electromagnetic waves around. For example, British engineer Roger Shawyer's EmDrive reflects microwaves inside a truncated cone and produces small but measurable thrust.

It would be an understatement to say that the two sides do not see eye-to-eye. Shawyer's critics dismiss his science instantly and refuse to look at his work. Any demonstration or experimental finding quickly degenerates into an exercise in finding flaws or loopholes, or accusations of fraud. Negative results, such as the tests by Prof Martin Tajmar at the University of Dresden, are seized on by the mainstream media with headlines like "Scientists just killed the EmDrive" in *Popular Mechanics* (**FT369:14**).

The tiny levels of thrust involved – at best, around the weight of a paperclip – make measurement contentious. While this is the same level of thrust as is produced by small space thrusters, it is low enough that a myriad of small effects in the laboratory, from air currents to stray magnetic fields, may produce an illusory positive result.

The other challenge is the lack of an agreed theoretical understanding of how the drive works. Every group working on this area seems to have a different theory, and designs its drives differently as a result. Hence they do not even accept that each other's designs could work.

Despite the resistance, numerous independent tests of propellentless drives have apparently produced anomalous thrusts. These include projects at Northwestern University in Xi'an in China, NASA's Eagleworks team, University of Plymouth, and various private organisations. Rumours claim that major aerospace companies have also successfully tested propellentless drives. US military defence agency DARPA has also carried out research in this area, with apparent success (**FT419:14**).

LEFT: BARRY-1 launches aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket on 11 November 2023.

Access to orbit has recently become more affordable with the advent of Cubesats

The argument could be resolved at a stroke by putting a drive on a satellite and testing it in space. Regardless of theory, if it works it will be a huge breakthrough for the space industry. The lifetime of a satellite is dictated by how much propellant it carries to adjust position, and this can take up to half of the launch weight. A solar-powered propellant-free drive could operate indefinitely, giving a satellite an unlimited lifetime.

Satellites are expensive though, and putting one into orbit pushes the price up even more. Few organisations would be willing to gamble millions on testing something which accepted science says is impossible.

Access to orbit has recently become far more affordable with the advent of cubesats, miniature satellites based on a modular architecture of 10cm cubes. A 1U cubesat is one such cube, a 3U cubesat is three cubes – and thanks to modern electronics all the necessary controls and communications can be packed into a cubesat with room for sensors or other payloads. Launch companies now provide arrangements for large numbers of cubesats from different customers to be launched in one mission.

On 11 November 2023 one of Elon Musk's fleet of SpaceX Falcon 9 rockets lofted a batch of some 90 cubesats including a 3U unit called BARRY-1 built and operated by start-up Rogue Space Systems. Rogue are in the business of payload hosting, and BARRY-1 includes hardware and software from different customers being tested in space for the first time. It has a Scalable Compute Platform to test artificial intelligence applications. And it also has a Quantum Drive.

The Quantum Drive was designed by IVO Systems Developers based on the Quantized Inertia (QI) theory developed by Mike McCulloch, formerly a lecturer at the University of Plymouth, whose work was funded by DARPA. McCulloch completed the DARPA project in 2023 and delivered a report showing positive experimental results. The IVO drive was tested in the laboratory for over 100 hours and reportedly produced thrust. But what really matters is whether it can work in space.

For the first few weeks after launch, BARRY-1 did nothing, settling down so its precise obit could be tracked. Some satellites can shift slightly due to 'outgassing' from components and other effects. On 4 December, Rogue Space Systems announced they were ready to begin the real work. "The team is preparing to begin payload testing of the Rogue Scalable Compute Platform and the IVO Quantum drives," according to a press release on 4 December.

The drive will be activated and the test will begin with the goal of raising the orbit by 60 miles/100km. Rogue say they expect the test to be completed by the end of the year. The satellite is being tracked, so success or failure should be obvious.

The drive was tested extensively before launch, but there is a lot to go wrong with experimental space launches. Critics will seize on a failure as proof the design does not work, and will either ignore a success or put it down to trickery. But if BARRY-1 does soar, McCulloch says there are plenty of people in the industry who are more interested in building technology that works than arguing about the weird physics behind it. Meanwhile, two more cubesats with different propellentless drives are set to launch in 2024…

PAUL DEVEREUX brings news of lost prehistoric populations and a cunningly hidden mediæval curse

LOST LANDS NORTH AND SOUTH

Over countless ages, with climate changes, flooding, seismic and volcanic events, and other natural catastrophes, land masses change or disappear, usually by being submerged. Here, we look at research into two current such cases, one in each hemisphere, both with evidence of lost prehistoric populations.

First, the submerged Continental Shelf area off present-day north-west Australia. This has recently been coming under closer multi-disciplinary scrutiny, one of the latest examples being a paper in *Quaternary Science Reviews* (2024) by researchers from Griffith, Queensland, Flinders, and Sydney Universities drawing on a range of findings and ecological modelling. The shelf is part of what was a vast but now submerged landmass (referred to as Sahul) that extended northwards linking Australia with Timor (in Indonesia) and New Guinea and eastwards around the whole northern coastline of modern Australia. But with the onset of the last Ice Age, 100,000 years ago, sea levels began to lower markedly, exposing an archipelago of islands that probably acted as 'stepping stones' for populations moving south. As sea levels continued to fall during the Ice Age, the whole Continental Shelf became fully exposed. The area of dry land would have been over twice the size of the UK.

The North-West Shelf off part of Australia's Kimberley region would have contained a large inland body of water, rivers, and a rich ecosystem for human survival. It is estimated that it could have supported a population of hundreds of thousands at the peak of the last Ice Age, around 20,000 years ago – genetic research (*Nature* 2023) indicates such large populations. Ultimately, the Ice Age came to an end, and rising sea levels drowned the shelf.

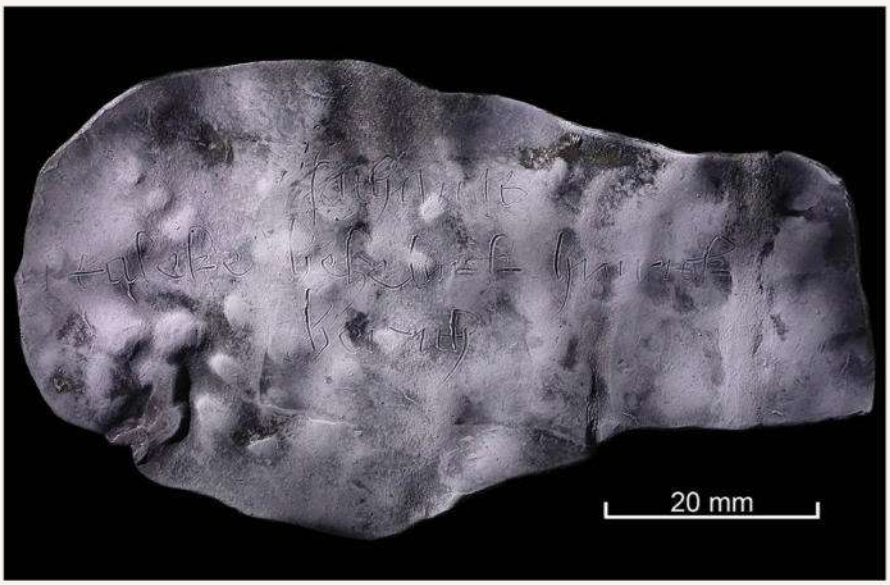
"Retreating populations would have been forced together as available land shrank," write the researchers of the *Quaternary* paper. "New rock art styles appeared at this time in both the Kimberley and Arnhem Land." They add: "[T]he drowning of the landscape is also recorded in the oral histories of First Nations people from all around the coastal margin, thought to have been passed down for over 10,000 years." There are recent findings of stone tools off the coast of the Pilbara region of northern Western Australia, and other hints of Mesolithic occupation of the North-West Shelf. It would seem that these refugees from the sinking shelf essentially represent the earliest peopling of Australia. A tremendously rich, multi-disciplinary area of study and discovery has opened up.

Main sources: Quaternary Science Reviews 324, 15 Jan 2024. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2023.108418 ; The Conversation, 20 Dec 2023. Also cited above: Nature 13 Dec 2023. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06831-w

Now, turning to the northern hemisphere, where there are numerous unexplored drowned landscapes of various kinds – in Europe alone that amounts to about three million square kilometres of lost lands. But a major European Research Council grant has now been awarded collectively to various European universities for the SUBNORDICA project, aimed at exploring some of these submerged lands in order to provide "a deeper understanding of how our ancestors lived in areas now under the sea".

The University of Bradford's Submerged Landscapes Research Centre is one of the institutions involved. It will team up with other European institutions to lead exploration of sea beds in the North Sea and the Baltic. The announcement states that the project "will apply the latest technologies to map the seabed, use AI and computer simulation to identify areas where long lost settlements may still survive and can be explored, enabling ethical development of the seabed."

Probably the generally best-known submerged land in the North Sea is that called 'Doggerland'. When this area linking what is now the British Isles with continental Europe was dry land, it was inhabited by Mesolithic people – fishermen and undersea cable layers often find ancient bones and tools dating to about 9,000 years ago. (For more, see **FT294:26-27, 383:14**.)



ABOVE: The faintly inscribed lead curse tablet found at the bottom of a mediæval German latrine.

ARCHEOLOGY IN MECKLENBURG-WESTERN POMERANIA (AIM-V)

A SPELL IN THE LOO

Archæologists in Germany have discovered a scrunched-up piece of lead at the bottom of a latrine at a construction site in Rostock. At first they assumed it to be just scrap metal, but when it was flattened out, it proved to be a 15th-century artefact. It was etched with almost invisible Gothic text reading *"sathanas taleke belzebuk hinrik berith"*. Researchers deciphered the text as a curse that was apparently aimed at a woman named Taleke and a man called Hinrik (Heinrich). It summoned up Beelzebub (Satan) and Berith, apparently a demonic spirit. The actual reason for the curse can only be guessed at, but it would seem that somebody really did not like the couple.

The archæologist who led the excavation pointed out that the find, being mediæval, was "very special" because such curse tablets have normally been known since much more ancient times in Greece and Rome. Indeed, a 1,500-year-old lead curse tablet inscribed in Greek was found in what is now Israel, while others 1,000 years older than that have been discovered. It was typical for such objects to be secreted in places where the victim was unlikely to notice them, so doing ongoing supernatural harm. All rather unpleasant.

Live Science, 15 Dec 2023.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

293: ALL GAS AND GAITERS

(Obvious titular tribute to Derek Nimmo – *Nota Bene!*)

According to Steinmeyer's biography (34-5), Fort's first job on the Albany *Argus* was to interview ministers, whose names he fished out of the city Directory, "searching for ministers among housepainters, blacksmiths, widows."

Having pinpointed peculiar Popes [**FT301:21**], seems only fair to cast an eye on their Anglican oppos, belonging as they do to an institution founded by a royal libertine, dubbed by suffragette Maude Royden-Shaw (1917) "the Conservative Party at Prayer" and whose lax theology has prompted the claim that for it God is an optional extra.

Outside impetus comes from the delightful *Field Guide to the English Clergy* (2018) by the young curate Revd. Fergus Butler-Gallie – online digest in the *Church Times* (26 Oct 2018). Don't miss the hilarious Glossary of ecclesiastic terms.

Happily, since only dead prelates qualify for admission, FT's Revd. Peter Laws is not in it – love to see a review by him. And, of course, men only – long time before the Vicar of Dibley.

Must begin, though, on a personal note. In the late 1940s I attended an elementary village school in Lincolnshire housed in the 17th-century church of St Thomas. Once a week, the local parson would come to impart some religious knowledge. Our obtruded boredom and inability to answer the simplest question drove this divine into paroxysms of rage. He would dole out retribution by pulling out clumps of our hair and lashing at us with a whip made out of bootlaces attached to a stick.

Whether the Headmaster (ex-army Captain) had any inkling, we never knew. Some years back, I happened to see a pamphlet about the village as it now is. To my astonishment, it included a picture of this flagellant Man of God still preaching in full clerical fig at 97. Had he been a left-footer, I'd have ejaculated Bless Me, Father...

As with most things, there is some classical pedigree. Butler-Gallie's gallery harks back to the Byzantine tradition of Holy Fools. True, there's no comparable Greek or Roman individual. Ancient rituals were arcane and messy affairs: extispicy, haruspicy, ornithoscopy, a lot of prophetic rooting-about in animal entrails. Enquiries also centred on the eating habits of Roman sacred chickens

– fair or fowl. Inauspicious omens forced postponement of public business. No wonder Appius Claudius Pulcher (consul, 249 BC), anxious for a sea-battle with the Carthaginians, when told his cargo of hens would not eat, had them hurled overboard, exclaiming, "If they will not eat, let them drink." He lost the battle, a blow for Roman religious agnostics.

Caligula unsurprisingly gets in the story, via Suetonius's biography (ch32 para3). Acting as a junior priest (*Popa*), he raised the axe above the sacrificial animal, with the formal question, "Shall I?" Senior priest ritually replied, "Do so", whereupon Caligula brought down the axe onto the sacerdotal bonce – more on this in Tristan Power's 'Caligula and the bludgeoned Priest' (*Mnemosyne* 68, 2015, online).

His successor Claudius had, among many maladies, a bad stutter. Hence, when conducting ceremonies, he often fluffed his words, thus forcing a complete re-run and infuriating the congregation.

Cicero (himself an augur) quotes (*On Divination* bk2 ch37) the crushing remark that it is a wonder two priests can pass each other in the street without laughing.

Butler-Gallie's tally of curiouser and curiouser clergymen is 48. As he acknowledges, some prize specimens are left out. I especially regret the loss of the unnamed (and Google-resistant) Lincolnshire parson who got an elephant drunk on ale and tried to vivisect it. I'd also have included another Lincolnshire (my local patriotism is showing) lad, the Revd. Ralph Tollemache (1826-1895), conspicuous for the onomastic oddities inflicted upon his 15 children (parodied in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*).

One typical example (complete list on Wikipedia): Leone Sextus Denys Oswolf Fraudatifilius Tollemache-Tollemache de Orellana Plantaganet – that *Fraudatifilius* (fake son) surely hints at some dark secret...

Butler-Gallie spans from the 17th to 20th centuries. It is striking how many are of our own times, most famously Harold Davidson (1875-1937), Rector of Stiffkey (pictured at left). Nicknamed 'The Prostitutes' Padre' for the special 'pastoral attention' he paid to chorus girls and actresses frequently invited to 'pyjama parties' at the rectory, he ended up eaten by a lion on the Skegness seafront – never saw such a thing in all my childhood trips to 'Skeggie'.

Wish I'd space for them all. Still, you'll find a cornucopia of thumbnail sketches in the *Church Times* digest. For congenial examples, Michael Ramsey, weirdest-ever Archbishop of Canterbury; Thomas Patten ran a Kentish smuggling operation while Lancelot Blackburne ascended from piracy to Archbishop of York; most literally egg-centric was Charles Lowder who hired East End ragamuffins to pelt a churchwarden with rotten hen-fruit.

After much havering, I chose to focus on Dean of Westminster William Buckland (1784-1856; see **FT413:42**), whose stated mission was to eat one of every creature on Earth, not excluding their fæces (link here with coprophagist Roman emperor Commodus). Delicacies served at Deanery dinners included crocodile, mice on toast, panther, porpoise, and puppies. Some discrimination was shown, fricassée of mole and kedgeree of bluebottles being dismissed as revolting. This odd gastronomy helped him expose the supposed blood oozing from a saintly statue: "Nonsense, I'd know the taste anywhere, this is very clearly bat urine". His crowning epicurean feat was to gobble down the embalmed heart of King Louis XIV – Buckland's England was clearly not confined to les *rosbifs*.

As Pope Gregory almost said, *non Angli sed Anglicani* – not Anglos but Anglicans...

Visions of light

ALAN MURDIE examines traditions of aerial lights as supernatural signs and portents

SIMO RÄSÄNEN / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ABOVE: The Northern Lights put on a spectular display over Kittilä in Lapland, Finland, in September 2023.

The last few months have seen some significant displays of the aurora borealis visible from Great Britain and southerly locations where they are usually rarely glimpsed. Today physicists are certain we can explain them as massive coronal discharges of electrically charged particles from the Sun, and to some extent predict their appearance, often connected with sunspot activity.

Psychologist Michael Persinger theorised that electromagnetic and geomagnetic forces and discharges are associated with certain altered states of consciousness (e.g. temporal lobe seizures), generating the sensation of psychic experiences and stimulating hallucinatory apparitional encounters (see **FT42:50-54, 201:39, 205:4, 270:40-43, 373:26**). Others have also proposed visual apparitions may arise from subjective effects stimulated by external electromagnetic energy acting upon sensitive brains (see Electric UFOs (1998) by Albert Budden).

In the Arctic, diverse cultures embraced notions of the Northern Lights arising from a supernatural realm

If true, we might thus expect an increase in ghost sightings at times of bright auroral displays. However, the evidence is far from clear-cut that electrically sensitive persons go on to hallucinate ghosts or anything else. Whatever the case, observers among traditional and indigenous societies living in northern latitudes were long prone to giving auroral displays ghostly explanations.

In the Arctic, Lapland, Siberia, and the furthermost parts of Scandinavia and North America, diverse cultures all embraced notions of the Northern Lights arising from a supernatural realm. In Canada, the Cree people conceived auroræ as the spirits of their departed ancestors attempting to speak with them, while the Algonquin tribe perceived them as fires set by their creator, Nanahbozho.

In northern parts of the UK, the lights were called 'the Dancers', 'the Merry Dancers', and 'Streamers'. In the Western Islands of Scotland, displays were associated with ghostly beings called 'the blue men'.

Across Europe auroræ were perceived as spectral omens and portents well into historical times. One display reputedly occurred on 29 December 1170, the night Thomas Becket was murdered at Canterbury (see **FT387:20-23**).

Remarkable auroral displays are proposed as underpinning entries found in Transylvanian records dating from the close of the 16th century that variously refer to a "burning in the sky", "two warriors fighting in the air" and "war servants fighting with skewers and swords in the air".

Those reported in January 1593 so exceeded standard astronomical expectations astrophysicists are driven to declaring "the dramatic description… was embellished with all sorts of fantastic accessories, so it remains unclear what was actually true of the report." All were taken as heavenly proclamations of terrible times ahead in Transylvania. ('Aurora Observations from the Principality of Transylvania from the 16th to the 18th Century CE' by Martin Stangl and Ulrich Foelsche in *Solar Physics* Vol. 296 No. 78 (2021)).

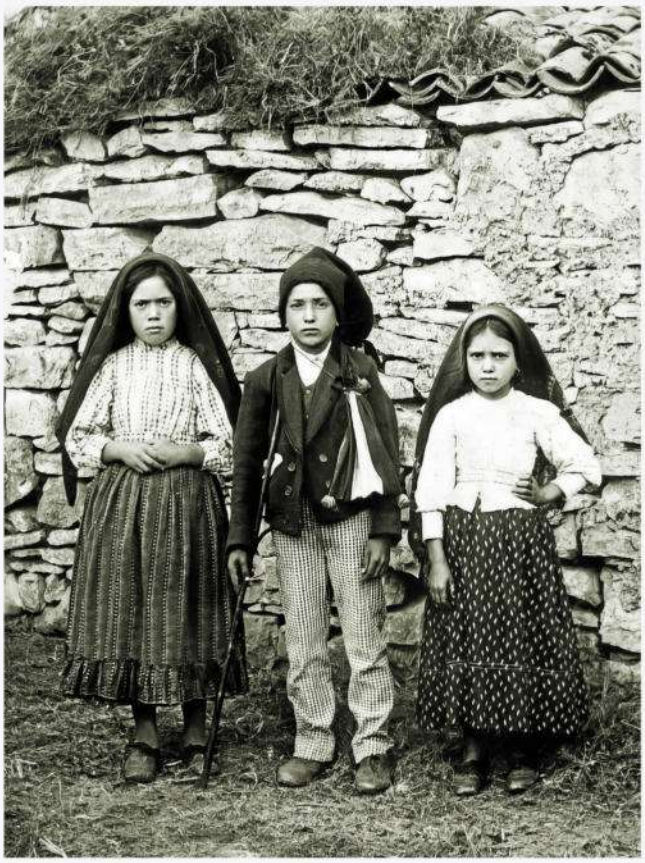
Even further south a significant display is suspected as coinciding with the Battle of Hattin in Palestine on 4 July 1187, when Saladin defeated the army of the King of Jerusalem. More than seven centuries later, the scholar CM Botley found that the inhabitants of the villages of Lubieh and Kefr Kenna (Cana in Galilee) still spoke of the armies of Crusaders and Saracens haunting them and recalled a 'Heaven of Blood' overhanging the countryside on the day of the battle. Botley discovered a mediæval Christian source stating that after a massacre of captured knights refusing to convert to Islam, "…during the three following nights when the bodies of the holy martyrs were still lying unburied, a ray of celestial light shone over them from above". Botley considered these fragments constituted "a memory of one of the very few displays of the aurora borealis that have been visible in Palestine" (see 'Folk Memory in Palestine', *Folklore* (1960) Vol. 71 No. 4 255-256.)

Nearly the whole of the 17th century saw a dramatic fall in sunspot activity, with a corresponding reduction in auroræ. Then came a phenomenal display of the lights seen over Britain at the time of the 1715 Jacobite rising. Its peak coincided with the arrival in Northumbria of the coffin of one the executed leaders of the rebellion, James Derwentwater, third Earl of Dilston, generating legends and superstitions persisting to this day. Traditionally, each 24/25 February these auroral lights reappear over Dilston Castle while the ghostly lord gallops the moors accompanied by his phantom army. Completing the spectral pageant, the shade of his wife walks around the ruined castle and across a nearby bridge wringing her hands.

Possibly other Jacobite ghost traditions may have been inspired by auroral displays. A long-standing tale avers a reddish or pinkish glow appears once a year each 27 July over the village of Killiecrankie in Perthshire, on the anniversary of the battle of 1689.

Noting this (and optimism triumphing over reason) I visited Killiecrankie and its beautiful National Trust preserved landscape on 27 July 2023, but saw no light or anything out of the ordinary myself. Local people admit knowing about the light, but no one admits to any sighting themselves or knows anyone who has witnessed it. I wonder if this may be the garbled account of a dramatic aurora in the distant past – or perhaps it has become blended with traditions about those of 1715?

Altogether one might explain or explain away a great many accounts of aerial lights as misperceived or misunderstood natural astronomical phenomena, with one problematic exception, one example that potentially ranks as the largest apparitional or visionary sighting of all time. This is the extraordinary aerial phenomenon reported at Fatima in Portugal in 1917 which remains an enigma after a century. For it was at Fatima on 13 October 1917, that a crowd estimated at 70,000 witnessed strange solar effects interpreted by the faithful as a sign from the Virgin Mary and leading it to be commemorated as the "day the Sun danced" (see **FT136:8-9, 137:66**).



BELOW: Lúcia dos Santos (left) with fellow visionaries Francisco and Jacinta Marto.

The event was the culmination of a series of visions reported over the previous six months by three peasant children: Lucia Santos (10) and her cousins Francisco Marto (9) and Jacinta Marto (7). Their experiences began on 13 May 1917 while they were minding sheep. Suddenly they saw a bright flash of light which focused their attention on the figure of a beautiful girl dressed in white standing on top of a holm oak tree.

In her Memoirs, Lucia described the lady, recalling: "She seemed more brilliant than the Sun and radiated a light clearer and more intense than a crystal glass filled with sparkling water, when the rays of the burning Sun shine through it." The apparition immediately put the children at ease, saying, "Do not be afraid. I will do you no harm," and telling them she came from Heaven. Touchingly, little Jacinta wanted to give the beautiful lady some bread and cheese.

She asked the children to return to the spot at the same hour on the 13th day of each month, and that on her final visit in October she would reveal her identity as the Virgin Mary and declare her wishes. Despite encountering parental and community scepticism, the children obeyed the instructions.

Crowds swelled every month in expectation of appearances, until on 13 October 1917 they witnessed a strange solar phenomenon. The Sun, seen as a disc of silver at which it was bearable to look, was perceived as trembling, moving up and down and emitting strange coloured rays, illuminating the faces of the onlookers and the landscape around. Then it seemed to swoop down to the ground, triggering widespread alarm that the world was ending.

One spectator, Father Joan Quaresma, testified: "I raised my eyes… and to my great astonishment saw, clearly and distinctly, a luminous globe moving from east to west, gliding slowly and majestically through space. Suddenly this globe, giving off an extraordinary

light, disappeared from our sight."

The extraordinary solar manoeuvre was repeated three times, lasting eight to 10 minutes in total. It was reportedly observed in towns respectively 8km (5 miles) and 40km (25 miles) away, weighing against theories attributing the event to a collective hallucination spread by suggestion from one person to another.

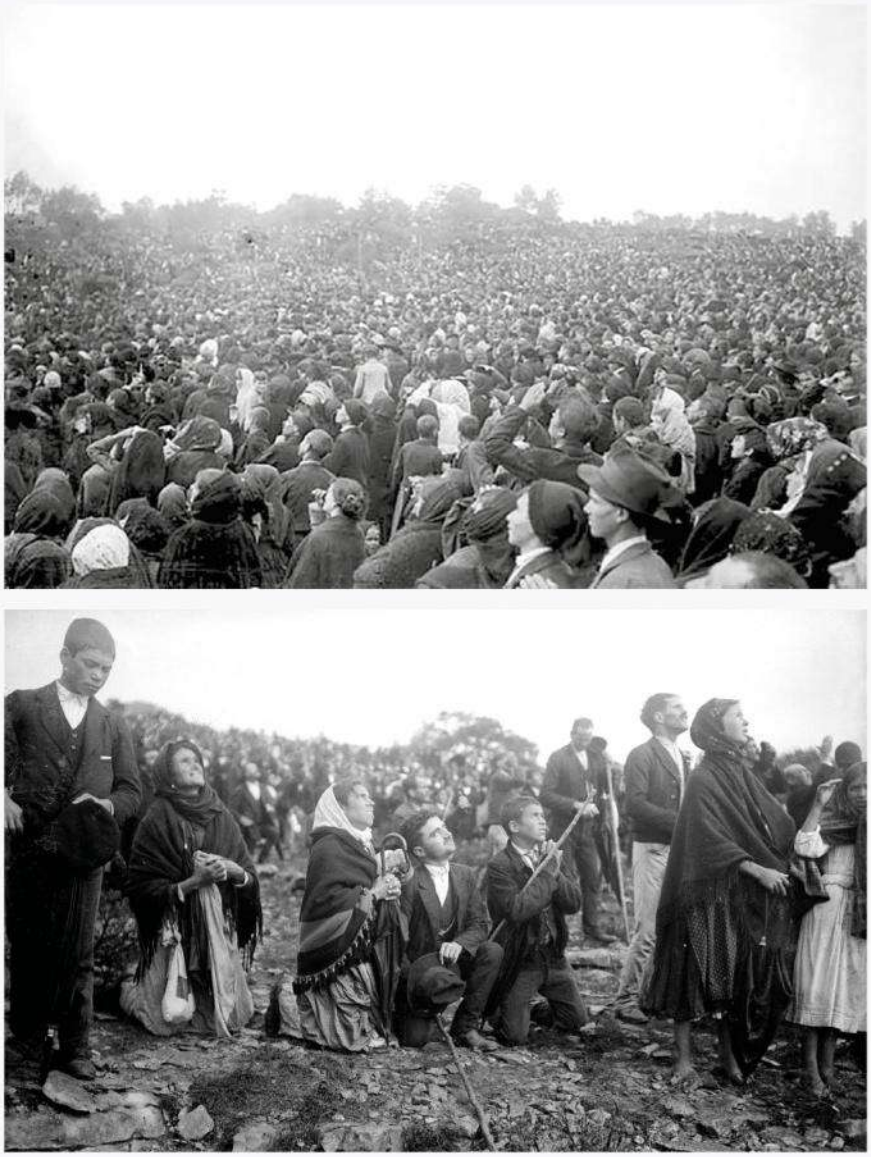
It is amazing what the stories of those three little children, who might have been disbelieved in any other context, have generated. Francisco and Jacinta died in the 1918 influenza pandemic, and Lucia entered a convent as a nun and keeper of three secret prophecies revealed by the Lady, giving dire warnings about the future.

In just over a century since, the site of the visions has been transformed into one of greatest Catholic shrines in the world, attracting five million pilgrims a year. Pope Francis visited in 2017 on the 100th anniversary to mark the canonisation of Jacinta and Francisco (see **FT355:22-23**).

Details of prophecies reputedly made by the Lady were slowly released by Lucia in 1936, 1937, and 1941, and disclosed in private admissions to the Vatican. The final one (seemingly foreseeing a papal assassination) was not revealed publicly until 2000).

My own visit to Fatima was on 5 June 2023, just over two weeks after the peak at the 13 May celebrations when hundreds of thousands converged to mark the anniversary of the first appearance. Unlike many churches and cathedrals which have matured over centuries, Fatima is a modernist triumph of brick, concrete and smooth marble of a stark solidity, but imbued with a more indefinable aura. It comprises two parts: a vast open-air site bathed in Portuguese sunshine on which stands a towering basilica and complex of prayer-spots and chapels, and a cavernous subterranean section at one end. The shrine can be appreciated all the more in early summer when it is quieter, allowing the opportunity to wander at ease, though a continual stream of pilgrims of all ages and nationalities arrives to worship and seek intercessions through prayer.

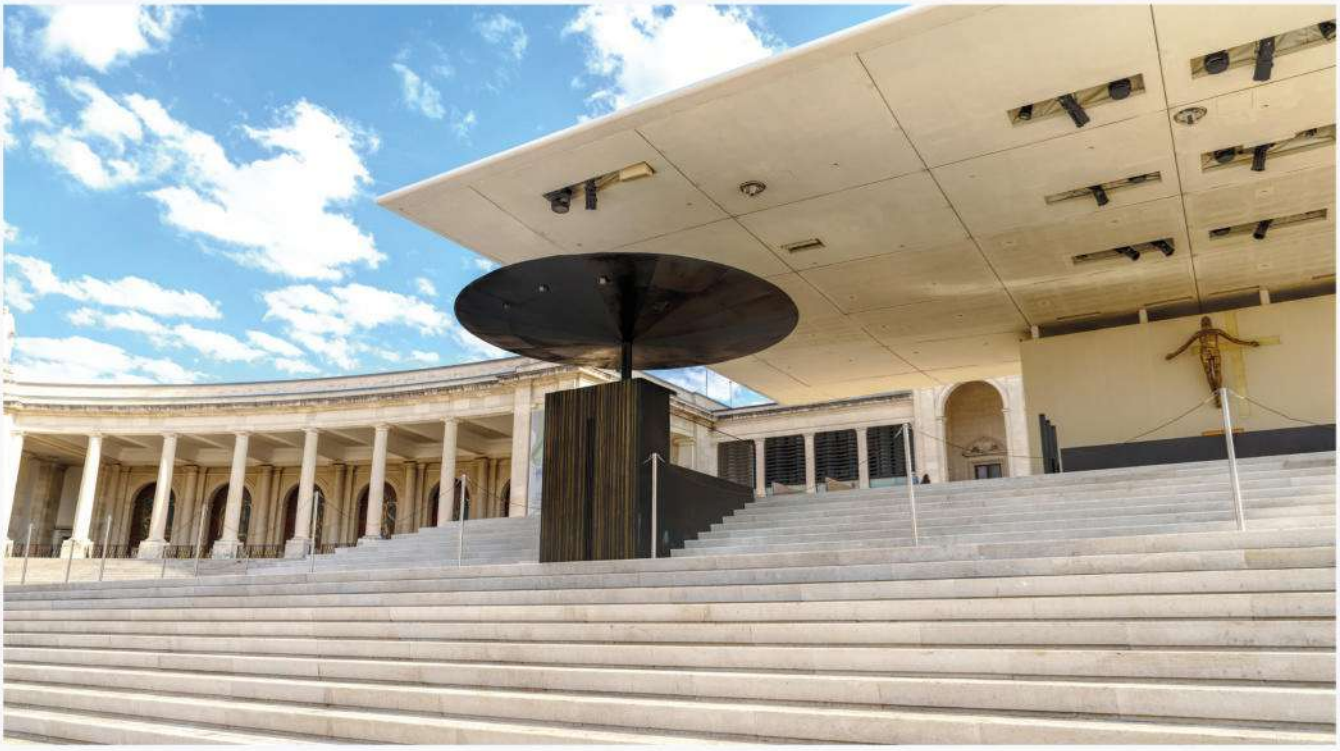
Now partly cordoned off is the still flourishing oak tree, site of the first vision. Close by is a candle shrine where large beeswax candles are available to be lit as offerings. The combined effect of the multitude of flames is more like the raw blazing of a bonfire than a tranquil radiance from a collection of offertory lights. Spaced around the site at intervals are individual crosses, monuments and images. One is a most striking globe-like representation of the dancing Sun. It at once reminded me of a satellite or UFO, though I concede someone looking at this pre-1950 would have viewed it wholly differently.



TOP: The crowd at Cova da Iria looking towards the Sun on 13 October 1917. **ABOVE**: People watching the Miracle of the Sun in a photograph published in the newspaper *Illustracao Portugueza*.

The problem even a vaguely fortean traveller confronts at Fatima is that no intellectual or historical mapping can completely fix the events of 1917 within any 21st century paradigm, whether in terms of general religious conceptions or of pure materiality. Like all positive places venerated by the faithful, Fatima provokes religious extremes. These range from devotees who shuffle the last stretch of the pilgrim's path on their knees to their ultra-Protestant opposites who shun it, foamingly denouncing Marian visions as snares of the Devil. For the majority of Christians, even for many Catholics, the Fatima visions remain an unexamined phenomenon that is avoided or passed over, with nominal believers caught between the influences of an overwhelmingly secular and technologically orientated society and a lurking and uncomfortable feeling it could all be true.

With such a spectrum of reactions among the faithful, it is not surprising Fatima attracts every other sort of explanation. For agnostics, atheists and believers of any other sort it is possible to take a psychological, parapsychological or folkloric perspective, encompassing altered states of consciousness, mass-hallucination, visits by angels, an alien contactee incident or some coincidental and wholly exceptional atmospheric event in the course of nature. This latter idea also connects with a further aspect of the Fatima phenomenon, prophecies involving



CASAROLLI / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

a display of the aurora borealis at the beginning of 1938.

In January 1938, a crimson aurora borealis was seen across the whole of Europe, as far south as Gibraltar, Sicily, and Greece. Many in the UK witnessed this magnificent light show, among them my grandfather Frederick Mann standing outside his bungalow on Barton Hill near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. He described it as like seeing an "immense rippling red curtain" stretching across half the sky.

In London, astronomer Patrick Moore (1923-2012), already a keen stargazer in his teens, recognised it at once as a rare southerly display of the lights, but many people across the south and west of England believed the capital was burning down.

Contemporary geomagnetic records show three solar storms occurring successively over 17/18 January, 21/22 January and 25/26 January 1938. Major solar eruptions and flares may generate interplanetary coronal mass ejections (ICMEs) of charged particles heading towards Earth, resulting in geomagnetic storms, low-latitude auroræ and cosmic-ray variations, presenting a serious threat to electrical infrastructure and a significant risk to modern civilisation.

Internationally, fears were compounded when Lucia divulged that the Lady of Fatima had told her in July 1917 that if "an unknown light" were seen in the night sky, a worse war than 1914-18 would break out, and Russia would "scatter her errors through the world, provoking wars and persecutions of the Church".

In this, the predictions of the Lady and her child visionary actually proved more prescient than a great number of secular pundits and politicians of the time. It also flatly contradicted Spiritualist mediums who had been glibly foretelling "Peace in Our Time" over 1938-1939.

In January 1938, a crimson aurora borealis was seen across the whole of Europe, as far south as Sicily

ABOVE: The Basilica of Our Lady of Fatima, Portugal. **BELOW LEFT**: Sister Lúcia Santos, who had taken holy orders in 1928, photographed in Fatima's Chapel of the Apparitions in 1946.

Accordingly, *Psychic News* reeled in shock when World War II started on 3 September 1939, carrying a woe-filled editorial on its front page admitting: "For many months nearly all the great guides made two definite prophecies 'There will be no major war in Europe. England will not be involved in war'". Their hopes dashed, the paper confessing "Spiritualists are facing their blackest week" with their faith being "strained to the uttermost limits of human endurance". (*Psychic News*, 9 Sept 1939). Despite this failure, in the subsequent weeks, months and years Spiritualism thrived, boosted by rising war-time casualties, but it remains a cogent reminder that prophecies from spirits should always be approached with caution.

Sources: *Our Lady of Fatima* (1949) by William Thomas Walsh; *The Message of Fatima* (1950) by CC Martindale; *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967) by John Michell; *Lightning, Auroras, Nocturnal Lights and Related Luminous Phenomena* (1982) by WR Corliss; *The Fabled Coast* (2014) Sophia Kingshill & Jennifer Westwood; *A Gazetteer of Scottish Ghosts* (1973) by Peter Underwood; *The Ghost's Who's Who* (1977) by Jack Hallam.

KARL SHUKER remembers a veteran Nessie researcher and shares a Yeti hair update

RIP HEPPLE

RIP R.I.P.

I was very sad to learn of the passing in early November 2023 of veteran Loch Ness monster chronicler RR (Ron) Hepple, better known to everyone as Rip. Although we corresponded on numerous occasions via letters etc, and I collected and avidly read his many years of quarterly Nessletters keeping his countless subscribers updated regarding Nessie, I was only lucky enough to meet Rip once, which was at the very first FT UnConvention, held in London way back in 1994. I gave the very first lecture there, and straight afterwards a man came up to me and said: "How on Earth do I follow that?" and smiled. The next speaker due to go on stage was Rip Hepple, so that was how I knew who this friendly person was (I'd never seen a photo of Rip, so I hadn't known what he looked like), and we had a pleasant chat before he took to the stage and gave a very enjoyable, excellent lecture of his own. Rip was a lovely man and a good friend for so many years. Every year since the 1990s we have unfailingly exchanged Christmas cards, so it seemed very strange indeed not to be writing one for him at Christmas, nor ever again. Rest in peace, Rip, you will be greatly missed by all of your many friends within the cryptozoological community and far beyond, and I feel certain that you now at last know the answer to the longstanding mystery of whether a bona fide cryptid truly lives in Loch Ness, and which fascinated you for such a very long time. [An obituary for Rip Hepple will appear in FT442.]

HIDING IN PLAIN SOUND?

Beaked whales or ziphiids, of which 24 living species are currently recognised, produce frequency-modulated echolocation pulses that appear to be species-specific. As revealed in a fascinating *Marine Mammal Science* paper published in August 2023 and authored by a team of researchers headed by Dr Jennifer LK McCullough from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries, Pacific Island Fisheries Science Center, based in Honolulu, Hawaii, this in turn suggests that a novel species of cryptic beaked whale may well be out there awaiting formal scientific discovery, presently hidden not in plain sight, however, but rather in plain sound. This is because for almost 20 years, whale researchers have been recording a unique beaked whale echolocation signal (more than 24,000 such recordings have been obtained to date), which is unlike that of any known beaked whale species, and whose currently unseen originator has been dubbed the Cross Seamount beaked whale.

This is because the Cross Seamount – an underwater mountain off southwestern Hawaii – is where scientists first heard its calls, back in 2005. Since then, they have been recorded across the Pacific Ocean from the Mariana Archipelago to Baja California, Mexico, and south to the Equator, yet only as far north as latitude 29°N. But that is not all. Within these warm waters, 92 per cent of Cross Seamount beaked whale vocal detections have occurred at night, with a further 6 per cent during crepuscular periods, and only 2 per cent during daylight hours, whereas those of other beaked whale species within this same geographical region vocalise mostly during the daytime, rarely at night.

Moreover, the Cross Seamount beaked whale calls have been detected by hydrophones in depths of as little as 150m (492ft) – in contrast no other beaked whale species has so far been documented foraging in such shallow waters. Coupled with its predominantly nocturnal activity, this yields a foraging behavioural pattern unique among beaked whales. That in turn provides further support for believing the Cross Seamount beaked whale to be either some obscure species already known to science but only from dead, beached specimens (and whose calls and foraging behaviour are therefore as yet undetermined) or a genuinely new, presently undiscovered, undescribed species. Meanwhile, the search for the Cross Seamount beaked whale continues apace, with whale scientists eager to match its vocals with some visuals after two long decades of disappointment.

https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/mms.13061; https://hakaimagazine.com/news/the-whale-thats-known-only-by-the-sound-of-its-voice/

HAIR TODAY, HORSE TOMORROW

Writer and meditation teacher Andrew Benfield has spent the past three years trekking through India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan, accompanied by his trusty if sceptical political analyst friend Richard Horsey in search of the elusive yeti. This culminated in their preparation of a BBC Radio 4 series documenting their quest and suitably entitled *Yeti*, which ended on a cliffhanger in June 2023. For the highlight of their peregrinations was receiving from an unnamed source an alleged yeti hair, as they revealed in the June episode. This hair was duly submitted for formal DNA analysis, with the result to be announced in a special October broadcast – and indeed it was. Sadly, however, the hair was revealed to have come merely from an Altai mountain horse, as opposed to a hairy mountain man-beast, much to the natural disappointment of Benfield and the appositely-named Horsey. But as they pointed out, this doesn't invalidate the anecdotal testimony collected by them from the many local people whom they interviewed regarding the yeti. Once again, therefore, the search continues.

www.livescience.com/human-behavior/conspiracies-paranormal/yeti-hair-found-in-himalayas-is-actually-from-a-horse-bbc-series-reveals

CRYPTO-CONFERENCE

MATT SALUSBURY reports from the 2023 Rencontres Europeennes de Cryptozoologie, in Dinant, Belgium

There was excitement as a dozen cryptozoologists crowded at the window. Someone insisted they'd seen "an out-of-place animal… an ostrich or something" walking past. Some were sceptical; there were cryptozoology in-jokes about "the unreliability of the witness" and ironic cries of "Canular!" ("hoax" in French). Our out-of-place animal turned to be a rhea pottering around its small "hobby farm" in the hotel's extensive grounds. We were in Day Two of 'Rencontres Europeennes de Cryptozoologie' (European Cryptozoology Meeting) organised by Abepar in Dinant, Belgium, where the Ardennes mountains begin.

I had attended the event 11 years ago (**FT290:38-40**) and struggled to follow the French. At the event in Brussels in 2017 I gave a presentation on pygmy elephants (**FT251:42-47**) in very poor French. They asked me back this year, but for a talk in English.

Shortly after my arrival there was a "round table" discussion presented by conference instigator Eric Joye. Bernard Heuvelmans, the "father of cryptozoology", was, of course, Belgian. I learnt during the round table that besides his zoology gig, Heuvelmans also had a brief career as a jazz singer in wartime and post-war Paris, where he reportedly met Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker. Eric described the proto-cryptozoologists who predated Heuvelmans – Erik Pontopiddan, a Danish Lutheran bishop whose two-volume *The Natural History of Norway* (1752-1753) covered kraken and mermaids and was the first published work to describe the giant squid. Other pre-Heuvelmans cryptozoolists included Pierre Denys de Montfort who in the 1770s collected possibly dodgy accounts of giant octopuses off France's Atlantic coast (**FT357:55, 362:56-57**). There was also Antonie Cornelius Oudemans, director of The Hague Zoo, whose English-language *The Great Sea Serpent* concluded that these could be a long-necked species of seal (**FT348:38-39**).

French dictionaries, noted

Heuvelmans had a brief career as a jazz singer in wartime Paris

Eric, have defined cryptozoology as a "science" for some time; it's firmly categorised as "pseudoscience" by an army of sceptical editors on today's English-language Wikipedia. Some 15,000 new species are discovered each year (of which only a handful are mammals). The Kobomani tapir was discovered in 2013, three species of monkey, including the kipunji, have been described to science in the 21st century, while *Caprimulgus solala*, the Ethiopian nightingale, has been scientifically described without a complete specimen having yet been found – we just have one of its wings.

I did my talk on big cats in Britain (Suffolk in particular), pleasantly surprised that I could understand all the French-language questions afterwards. One young first-time punter, a local vet's assistant, said he'd been inspired by recent news reports of a big cat seen on the Belgian-German border. I mentioned in my talk that two fortean investigators in the UK – Neil Arnold in Kent and Darren Mann (the Paranormal Database) in Ipswich – regularly get big cat reports from Belgium or the Netherlands as there seems to be no one easily identifiable to report big cat sightings to in those countries.

The *tigre de Tasmanie* (Tasmanian tiger or thylacine) – and whether it still lives among us – was the subject of Adele David's talk. Thylacines had been hunted for about a century in the belief that they killed sheep, with bounties offered for their skins. The practice was finally banned in 1936 – too late: the last known thylacine died that year in Tasmania's Hobart Zoo. Reported sightings of thylacines in the wild started almost immediately. The species was declared extinct in 1982. But Adele told us there have been around 3,000 witness reports, including many on the Australian mainland. There have been possible thylacine tracks, videos and recordings of its calls. There is consistency in sightings with descriptions of something "like a dog with a broken back", a "steep" sloping tail, a "particular" gait and a distinctive, strong odour.

Veteran cryptozoologist Michel Raynal explained how "the Belgians failed to discover the okapi". The British pipped them to the post by a few months, when Philip Sclater formally described *Equus(?) johnstoni* (now *Okapi johnstoni*) for the Royal Zoological Society of London in 1901, based on a striped okapi-skin belt sent by Sir Harry Johnston from Uganda. From the 1870s various explorers, first Germans then French and Belgians, reported "strange antelopes", donkey-like animals, something "zebra-like" or an "antelope-ass-giraffe". These were known by various peoples as *ku-mbutti*, *atti*, *makapi*, *ndumba*, *abuttu* or *okapi*.

LEFT: A clutch of cryptozoologists in search of an unknown animal (it turned out to be a rhea in the hotel grounds).

Local chiefs showed their status by wearing belts made from the animal's hide. Lieutenant Leon Vincart, in the service of "the authorities of the Belgian Congo", in 1899 sent one such belt to Maredsous Abbey, not far from Dinant, where his brother was a monk and where Father Grégoire Fournier had a zoology collection which exists to this day. Michel tracked down the okapi-skin belt, still in the collection and logged just a few months before Sclater's description.

Dr Charles Paxton presented work "in its very early stages" that asked: "How can we explain cryptozoological experiences?" There are, he said, no rules for explaining encounters with creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster, for which there are now over 100 different hypotheses on offer, mostly involving misidentifications. Charles's studies are now taking him from marine biology and statistics into the realms of philosophy and "thought experiments".

Concentrating on historic sea serpent sightings with multiple witnesses, he described what happens if we have two hypotheses of "equal explanatory power": we choose the simplest one. He went into offsetting complexity and explanatory power in explaining sea serpent sightings, "abductive arguments" as used by Sherlock Holmes and "the problem of causation". He admitted that he was "trying to find a tame philosopher to help me get through the philosophical literature" on this.

Looking to the future, Eric has plans for a cryptozoology "festival" next time, aimed at a broader, non-specialist audience. Details will be on the Abepar website: www.cryptozoologia.eu/.

You can read about Suffolk's big cats and much more in Matt Salusbury's new book *Mystery Animals of Suffolk* (https://big-catsofsuffolk.com).

TOXTETH DAY OF THE DEAD 2023: THE KROSSING

IAN SIMMONS takes a ferry 'cross the Mersey for a glimpse of the afterlife according to the KLF

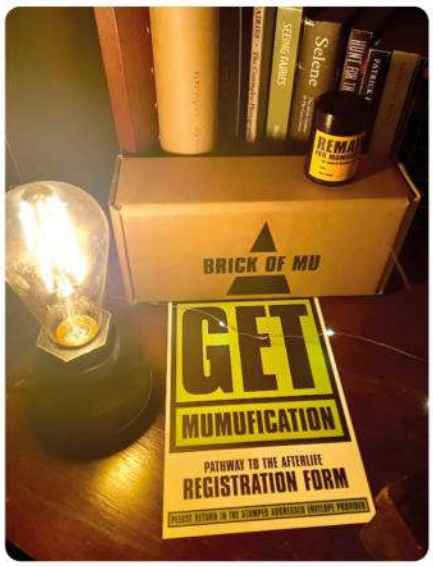
It is 23 November 2023, and I'm standing in the middle of a sports hall at The Florrie, a community centre in Toxteth, Liverpool. I'm wearing a fluorescent safety jacket, a Charles Fort T-shirt, a furry "roadkill hat", complete with ears, and a pair of yellow and black combat trousers with an even brighter pair of yellow Y-fronts over the top, Superman-style. They have "K2 Plant Hire – No Bricks Kept in These Pants Overnight" printed on the seat. I have absolutely no idea what is going on. Around me a crowd of enthusiastic people swirls, most wearing similarly outlandish gear. Non-binary comedian, occultist and heavy metal historian Andrew O'Neil is setting up a "Skool of Ritual" behind me; I first met Andrew at legendary fortean Steve Moore's funeral in 2014 (obit **FT314:24-27**). Meanwhile, doing an admirable job of bringing order to this ferment (well, maybe not order, but a more focused form of chaos; this is not an event at which order is encouraged), is Daisy Campbell, daughter of another sadly departed FT stalwart, Ken Campbell (obit **FT242:30**). Liverpool rock legend Pete Wylie is here in an electric purple fur hat and rubber trousers, while, outside, cultural provocateur Bill Drummond, in paint splattered overalls, has a team hand-painting a soviet-era Russian ice cream van yellow with black stripes, and another group is reverently easing a pallet containing the beginnings of a brick pyramid out of a hire van.

So, what exactly is going on? Well, I am here for the Toxteth Day of the Dead 2023: The Krossing, and what this actually is will take a bit of unpacking. The event is the brainchild of Bill Drummond and his colleague Jimmy Cauty, best known as The KLF (but also the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu, the JAMs, the Timelords and other names), whose Illuminatus-themed hits made them the world's best-selling singles band of 1991. Never the most conventional of groups, they crashed and burned in a burst of creative chaos involving a partnership with Extreme Noise Terror, a dead sheep and a machine gun, followed by the deletion of their entire back catalogue, which then remained unavailable for 23 years (23 is important in all this; those familiar with Robert Anton Wilson or William Burroughs will understand why. For more, see

THOMAS ECKE

ABOVE: Tom Calderbank rallies the troops. **BELOW**: The author's brick. **FACING PAGE**: The Skool of Pyramid Pullers transporting the People's Pyramid past the Liverpool Pierhead en route to Birkenhead.

YOU GET A BRICK WITH A CAVITY AND A CONTAINER FOR 23 GRAMMES OF YOUR CREMATED REMAINS



IAN SIMMONS

FT23:32:35).[1] Drummond and Cauty then, for reasons that even they don't seem to fully understand, went on to burn a million pounds earned from their hits in a remote Scottish boathouse.[2]

So, scroll forward to 2017, 23 years after the burning. Drummond and Cauty re-emerge and hold a three-day event as The JAMS (the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu) at which they announce they will be forming a company known as K2 Plant Hire. This incarnation is not primarily about music; instead, it is intended to build the People's Pyramid. The People's Pyramid results from the process of MuMufication, which, as their website explains, "is a new form of memorialisation, a funeral ceremony for like-minded people irrespective of creed or background. MuMufication is the act of having a small portion of cremated human remains fired in a Brick of Mu and laid in the People's Pyramid".[3] This is not a prank, windup or scam; K2 Plant Hire are serious. They have partnered with a proper, licenced, firm of undertakers and you can sign up to do this after you die – you get a brick with a cavity and a container for 23g of your cremated remains and have to fill out various certificates and consent forms. I have,

THOMAS ECKE

THOMAS ECKE

ABOVE: Crowds gather at Birkenhead's Future Yard **BELOW**: The renovated KLF ice cream van, from which fired bricks were dispensed to the families of this year's additions to the Pyramid.

and my brick awaits me on the shelves behind my desk, ready for my passing, something I organised after having a near-brick experience during a vicious bout of Covid earlier this year. My friend Vinay Gupta's dad is already in the Pyramid.

The year's Bricks of Mu are laid at the brick laying ceremony every year on the Toxteth Day of the Dead, which takes place every 23 November, and apart from a Covid hiatus in 2020, the ceremony has taken place annually since 2017 in various forms, with up to 26 people's remains joining the pyramid every year. It is intended that the pyramid should continue to grow, and ceremonies take place, until 34,592 bricks have been laid and the People's Pyramid stands 23 feet high, when it will be complete. It is expected that this will take 999 years or more.

Between Toxteth Days of the Dead, the pyramid has been kept in a customised shipping container, with the hope that it would eventually find a permanent home in Toxteth. This has not come to pass, but a place has been found for it in Future Yard, a community arts venue in Birkenhead.

This year's event, "The Krossing", involves participants escorting the Pyramid over the Mersey to its permanent home. Once the chaos begins to take some form in the Florrie, we get the opportunity to take part in a variety of "Skools" during the day; some are about the practical side of transferring the pyramid, such as the Skool of Brick Bearers and the Skool of Pyramid Pullers; others are about what the shape of future events, now being renamed The People's Day of Death, could be. There is a Skool of Brick Making, too, where you learn how to make the MuMufication bricks with a professional brick maker and the KLF Re-enactment Society is performing their version of the KLF's *Chill Out* album in the rear hall; to gain access you have to present an assortment of items such as an ordnance survey map or a bundle of sticks. My partner Frances and I take part in the Stone Club Skool, which considers the Pyramid in the context of standing stones and ancient monuments, and concludes, among other things, that the monument is about the ritual, not the other way round. Everyone is happy, friendly and engaged, and the atmosphere is immensely warm and supportive, particularly for those who have come to see their friends' or

THOMAS ECKE

THOMAS ECKE

ABOVE: Daisy Campbell, daughter of the late Ken Campbell, cements the new bricks into the pyramid while eulogies are read. The pyramid will be complete when 34,562 bricks have been laid and it reaches 23ft in height. This may take 999 years.

relatives' bricks added to the Pyramid this year. There seem to be a lot of *FT* readers here.

The Skools end late afternoon, and we disperse for food and a breather, reassembling at Liverpool Pierhead at 5.23 for the beginning of the procession. At the appointed time the area is seething with a colourful horde of several hundred; the People's Pyramid arrives on a trolley drawn by the Skool of Pyramid Pullers and accompanied by horned shaman figures, drums, chants, singing and oration. We seem to be causing quite a stir among the locals. Shortly after six, the whole lot of us board a specially chartered Mersey ferry, with the Pyramid, for the actual Krossing. We get a Peter Blake decorated Dazzle Ship ferry, which seems curiously appropriate. The day has been a stormy one, but the rain holds off for us, although the Mersey crossing is very choppy. We conduct it in complete silence except for a minute, mid-river, when we are encouraged to shout the names of our own dead. I include our former *FT* colleague Joe McNally, who passed earlier this year (obit **FT432:28-29**), far too young. It is a solemn and moving journey during which the event transitions from entertaining chaos to a more organised and contemplative act of remembrance.

On reaching the Birkenhead side we disembark, walking in exaggerated slow motion, led by Daisy, and are met with a choir and the renovated KLF ice cream van, spouting green smoke, from which the families of this year's dead are given their fired bricks to process with to Future Yard. We walk the mile and a half there behind the pyramid, being hooted and waved at by passing cars, surprised to see a fluorescent multitude trekking through industrial Birkenhead in the darkness; people come to their front doors and hang out of windows to see us pass.

Once we arrive, the pyramid is set on the stage and the bricklaying begins. Each brick to be added is brought to the stage by the deceased's family, taken by Daisy, and cemented onto the pyramid while a brief eulogy is read, after which Bill strikes a bell made from a gas cylinder and we applaud in their memory. It feels profound, right, and an appropriate reinvention of the ritual of death for modern generations, one that finally goes beyond the Victorian trappings that still surround most funerary rites. And then, of course, the after-party; there is beer, much good cheer, rum-laced hot chocolate and dancing, with KLF music pumped out of the ice cream van deep into the night for those still on their feet. The following day, K2 Plant Hire announce their plans for a chain of branded care homes, and an attempt to make Christmas number one with an associated single.

In creating the pyramid and the Toxteth Day of the Dead, Drummond and Cauty have done something deep and meaningful. They have created a new folk tradition, one that really feels like a *true* folk tradition, made by the people it is for, partly invented as it goes along, both rowdy and solemn; something that has meaning because it has been given meaning by the people involved. This is important. Traditions don't have to be old; memorial doesn't have to follow existing rules. All traditions were new once and for the wellbeing of the future it is important that new ones keep being formed, and this one is both life-affirming and a lovely way to remember our dead. Long may it continue. Ken Campbell, whose legacy, through Bill, Daisy and many others, has played a part in all this, said that in everything you do you should strive to "Be Heroic!". This was most definitely Heroic. Drummond and co will be remembered for the hits and the stunts, but it is this that should be their lasting legacy.

NOTES

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23_enigma

2 See John Higgs's excellent *The KLF: Chaos, Magic and the Band who Burned a Million Pounds* (2013); also **FT107:20**, **360:22**.

3 mumufication.com

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Updates on some of last year's news stories: mummies, mushrooms and mystery gassers

MEXICAN CONGRESS ALIENS [FT437:17]

In September, Mexican UFO YouTuber Jaime Maussan persuaded parliamentary deputy Sergio Gutiérrez Luna to sponsor his presentation of what he claimed were two "alien corpses" to the Mexican Congress. His dramatic presentation of the "remains" in coffin-like boxes met with a mixed response, with UAP witness Ryan Graves, who was present at the unveiling, describing it as "a huge step backwards" and an "unsubstantiated stunt". Since then, the story has swiftly unravelled, with journalist Aja Romano in particular uncovering many aspects of the dubious history of these "aliens", which goes back several years before their Mexican "reveal". His investigations suggest the alien mummies derive from the crowdfunded "Alien Project" initiated by self-described, but unqualified, "archæologist" Thierry Jamin. This project promised "to determine, through extensive scientific analysis (mainly DNA and C14), the origin of the bodies and the mummified organs discovered in southern Peru in January 2016".

Jamin claimed the bodies came from a man named "Luis Quispe, a.k.a. Paul R" described as the "holder of an incredible secret", who was his contact with the "grave robbers" who had actually found the remains. Jamin's crowdfunding raised $42,000 (£33,000) from over 1,000 contributors on the back of these claims. However, in 2017 ufologist John Greenewald discovered that Quispe was a YouTuber known for making videos of mummies that looked exactly like the Nazca mummies, to show viewers how such mummies could be hoaxed, and that most of Jamin's "experts" had fraudulent or unverifiable scientific credentials. It has been suggested that the money raised through crowdfunding was ln fact used to pay for the manufacture of the "bodies" that the project was supposed to be investigating. Also in 2017, the website Cientificos determined that "This mummy is an archæological mummy from which two fingers have been removed and the number of phalanges increased on the remaining three fingers," and that the hand was probably created from the bones of two different people.

ABOVE: Serial alien mummy hoaxer Jaime Maussan. **BELOW:** The "Mepetec Creature" and one of the mummies featured in the so-called "Roswell Slides"

In 2021, a study published in the *International Journal of Biology and Biomedicine* argued that one of the skulls had been constructed from "a deteriorated llama braincase and other unidentified bones". Despite this, Maussan became involved and promoted the bodies on gaia.com, with a revised origin story that had them looted by a band of robbers led by someone named "Mario" in 2015. This led the The World Committee on Mummy Studies, an archæological organisation, to point out that the "aliens" were most likely the remains of actual pre-Columbian mummies that had been "maliciously manipulated and mutilated" to create fraudulent aliens, adding that: "The criminal abuse of corpses for petty ends violates human dignity in a profound way. Thus, exploitation of pre-Columbian mummies carried out by this organisation, attacks and particularly offends the Andean Culture, implying that its achievements were due to an alleged 'alien aid'."

Follow-up scrutiny of the DNA evidence Maussan claimed showed the bodies were of alien origin also found that it in fact showed the opposite, confirming that they were human. As a result, it seems the Mexican Congress "aliens" can be added to the list of cases Maussan has supported that have later been debunked. These include the "Metepec Creature", which turned out to be a skinned monkey, a "demon fairy" he sold for $10,000 in 2016, which was found to be "some conglomeration of a bat, wooden sticks, unseen epoxy and other items designed to deceive", and the "Roswell Slides" (**FT329:26-27, 335:26**) which allegedly showed an alien body that turned out to be the remains of a mummified two-year-old boy. *vox.com, 16 Sept 2023.*

MYSTERY GASSERS [FT430:6-7, 435:24-25]

A major story during 2023 concerned the alleged attacks in Iran by "mystery gassers" who somehow infiltrated toxic chemicals into schools, causing widespread illness. Over the years, there has also been a persistent stream of stories that allege burglars and home invaders have been pumping anæsthetic gas into houses to render the inhabitants unconscious while they carry out their crimes. Tales of mysterious poisonous gas attacks go back at least to the legendary "Mad Gasser of Mattoon" in the 1940s (see **FT48:16, 82:28, 131:32-38, 216:36-39**). Such attacks are considered to be the stuff of social panics and urban legend with virtually no evidence that any actual gassings have taken place. However, in a rare case of ostension – the factual confirmation of a legendary occurrence – a Florida man has been caught on video trying to poison his neighbours by filling their home with toxic gas.

Umar Abdullah believed that a lingering chemical smell in his flat in Oxford Place, Tampa, Florida, was causing his family to suffer eye and skin irritation and shortness of breath, and their 10-month-old baby to experience persistent vomiting. Several visits by Tampa Fire and Rescue Service failed to find the source of the smell, so Abdullah installed a hidden camera outside his door to see if he could find out where it was coming from. His tactic paid off; he caught his downstairs neighbour Xuming Li, 36, sneaking up to his door and injecting liquid under it with a syringe "on several occasions". This liquid was then evaporating and causing the chemical smell in Abdullah's flat. Police testing discovered that it contained the narcotics methadone and hydrocodone, the side effects of

which can include restlessness, stomach pain, vomiting, difficulty breathing, skin irritation, chest pain, diarrhoea, hallucinations, and fainting. An investigating police officer also sought medical treatment for skin irritation that he believed was caused by the chemicals. It is surprising, though, that the drugs could have any effect when inhaled as a vapour in the concentrations present in the flat. Li is thought to have targeted Abdullah and his family because he felt his noise complaints about them had gone unheeded. He was charged with aggravated stalking, dispersing a chemical agent, possession of a controlled substance and battery on a law enforcement officer for exposing police to the chemicals. In addition, he was evicted by the homeowners' association, who required him to pay $50,000 in damages and the association's attorney's fees. *nbcnews.com, 25 Aug 2023.*

MUSHROOM POISONER [FT438:72]

After several relatives of Erin Patterson's estranged husband died or suffered life-threatening illness after dining with her at her home in Leongatha, near Melbourne, Australia, it was found that they had been poisoned by highly toxic death cap mushrooms. While suspicion fell on Patterson, she protested her innocence, and circumstances were sufficiently ambiguous for her to initially avoid arrest, with police saying that "at this point in time, the deaths are unexplained," but that they had not ruled out "nefarious activity". Following intensive analysis of Patterson's computer, police have now charged Patterson with three counts of murder and two of attempted murder, including that of her husband Ian, who was supposed to be at the fatal meal, but did not turn up. She is also alleged to have attempted to kill him on three other occasions while he battled what was thought to be a mysterious gut illness. At one point this required him to be put in a medically induced coma for 16 days to save his life. His "illness" is now believed to have been due to Patterson's repeated attempts to poison him. Police say that the evidence they have amassed is "voluminous" and that Patterson's trial is likely to run "for many weeks". *Courier-Mail [Sydney], 4 Nov 2023.*

PENIS PANIC [FT438:4-5, 439:5]

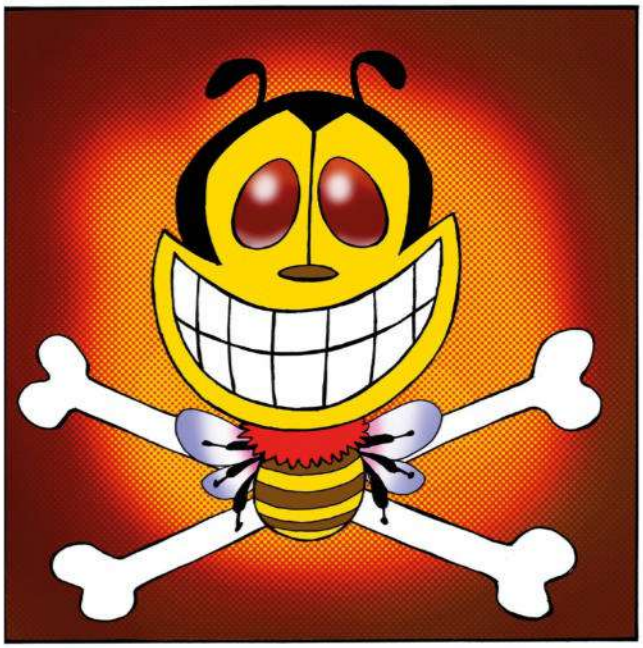
In Nigeria, the penis theft panic continues to expand. Having encompassed vagina and breast theft, the scare has now produced allegations that "ritualists" are kidnapping people for sacrifice, not just to steal their erogenous zones. Allegedly they are using hypnosis to abduct people who hail tricycle rickshaws in Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State. One alleged victim, named as "Miss Konbonye", claims she was kidnapped after visiting a bank in the city on 1 December, and held for four days, although she was left unharmed for some reason. She claimed that: "On Friday 1 December I left my house at Okaka for the bank to do some transactions. I finished and came out of the bank and flagged down a *Keke* [tricycle]. There was one man at the back when I entered. The man brought out a white handkerchief. That was the last thing I remembered until I woke up in a thick forest. I saw dead bodies with blood all over. There was also a pregnant woman who was cut open and the baby in her womb brought out. One of the men led me to the others and there was some discussion, and he was asked to take me away. Immediately I was taken to the tricycle. I later woke up close to a church."

Konbonye was discovered in a distressed state at around 4am by church members, but once they had calmed her down, she was able to tell them what had happened, and they contacted her sister who took her to hospital for a medical check. Konbonye also reported her ordeal to the police but was unable to tell them where she had been taken. *sunnewsonline.com, 9 Dec 2023.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

276: BEES



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

We're running out of honeybees and we're all doomed.

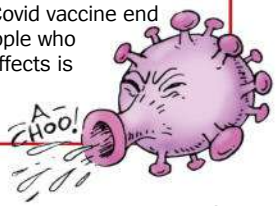
The "truth"

We are running out of bees, and we quite possibly are all doomed, but we can at least stop worrying about the honeybees – there's probably more of them today than there's ever been. It's just all the other bees that are dying off. One theory concerning the origin of this misunderstanding is that publicity over honeybee hives suffering Colony Collapse Disorder in the 2000s became mixed up, in minds and in media, with the general decline in numbers of pollinating insects. Many people got the idea that "save the bees" referred to or at least included honeybees, and that amateur beekeeping was a way to help. Conservationists find this confusion concerning; while domesticated bees are not endangered, a great many species of wild bee are, and there is a fear that the eyes of the public and of public bodies are being drawn in the wrong direction. (By introducing new diseases and by competing for resources, honeybee hives can even have a negative effect on bee populations, though conservationists stress that this is not a reason to oppose beekeeping as a hobby). Hundreds of species of essential pollinating insects are in imminent danger of extinction – attention needs urgently to switch to them, away from the plentiful honeybees.

Sources www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2023/04/why-are-bees-important; www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/yes-some-pollinators-need-saving-but-honeybees-are-actually-doing-just-fine; www.wcl.org.uk/which-bees-need-saving.asp

Mythchaser

We once wondered (**FT421:23**) whether it's true that the worse your reaction to an inoculation, the better your protection. In an unexpected boost for what sounded like an old wives' tale, a new study (www.nytimes.com/2023/10/07/health/covid-vaccine-side-effects.html) might suggest that recipients who suffer symptoms like headache, fever, fatigue and chills following a Covid vaccine end up with more antibodies against Covid than people who do not suffer symptoms – though lack of side-effects is not being linked with lack of efficacy.



THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Dead chefs, gay sex and a former first lady who is actually a man – not to mention a new Netflix movie. **NOEL ROONEY** ventures down the rabbit hole of Obama conspiracy theories...

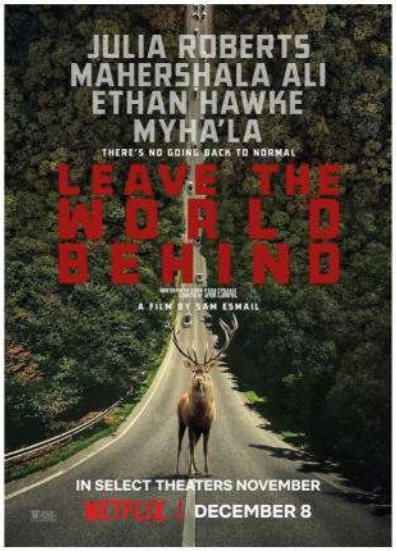
BEHIND THE CURTAIN

2023 was an interesting year for the Obama family. And perhaps, if the soothsayers in the C-sphere have it aright, 2024 may be even more so. In the seven years since the Obama presidential era officially ended, the family's affairs have largely bubbled just under the conspiracist surface, but once in a while a new story emerges to trouble the waters and join the growing canon of Obama-related theory.

That canon is, on the quiet, starting to make the Obamas resemble the Clintons as objects – or perhaps paragons – of conspiracist focus. The body count is less impressive (though it's still there) but the rumours are mounting up. This last year saw some of the existing stories being consolidated and other, new chapters opened.

The feature story involved a movie: *Leave the World Behind*, a dystopian, post-apocalyptic vision of a world after the mother of all cyber attacks has left humanity to its own devices (actually, 'devices' seems unlikely in the circumstances) and nature to take its revenge. Barack and Michelle were the executive producers and, according to the director and crew, were closely involved in all stages of the movie's production.

The film has been described, or decried, in the Conspirasphere as a piece of standard Illuminati predictive programming. From the name of the pagan god Baal in the credits, to the number 666 having a significant product placement role, the film allegedly flaunts its elite cabal credentials at every turn. Quite why one of the alleged principal architects of the Great Reset would spend so much time and effort on a spoiler is not explained, but likely comes under the category of hiding in plain sight.



It reveals itself in reverse speech as "Thank you Satan"

The tragic death of the family chef Tafari Campbell (**FT437:11**) was a less positive burst of publicity; and, like so many stories that rattle like closet skeletons, this one is still running. The story has changed shape regularly since its first airing; folk in the C-sphere suspect this is because evidence that implicates Barack Obama (it's not entirely clear how he is so implicated) is gradually emerging. Narrators of the official account have not been helpful in this respect.

The re-emergence of Larry Sinclair has been similarly unhelpful. Mr Sinclair has been publicly claiming for some years that he engaged in drug-fuelled gay sex with Obama in 1999. Sinclair is not the only person to come forward with claims that the ex-president is gay. It shouldn't matter (ask Leo Varadkar), but the responses to the recooked rumours, both for and against, show that, sadly, it still does in some circles.

Meanwhile, Michelle Obama was stirring rumours of her own. The increasing fragility of Joe Biden, and the unpopularity of his vice-president Kamala Harris, has left many Democrats doubtful that the pair offers anything resembling a dream ticket in the upcoming elections. Factor in the growing mainstream acceptance of the Hunter Biden story and you have a recipe for electoral disaster. Enter Ms Obama, according to some commentators. C-sphere prophets are busy telling anyone who cares to listen that she will step in at short notice when the MSM finally notices what all right-thinking Americans know – that the president is gaga, and criminally corrupt to boot, and his right-hand person is incompetent.

But then, if you've been down the right rabbit holes, you will be aware that the Obama presidency never actually ended. Joe is at best an inept sock puppet; his every word and move is scripted by the *eminence grise* behind the curtain. And there is video evidence of the man himself expressing the wish that he could run things from behind the scenes. So installing Michelle in the White House is really nothing more than business as usual – think Big George, Little George.

In fact, mention of the Bush dynasty only cements the vision of secret continuity. If a 12-year-old schoolgirl could work out that Barack Obama is related to every American president except one (how did lonely Martin van Buren manage to sneak in?) then adult patriots can surely work out that the whole thing is a family affair; a venerable parade of the various offspring of King John, all standing proudly on the wrong side of the Magna Carta table.

The electoral limelight falling on Michelle Obama has disturbed some ugly dust bunnies too. The people who claim that the erstwhile first lady is actually a man were busy in 2023. A voter registration form turned up online apparently showing that Ms Obama put down her sex as male (this was in 2014, so before gender preferences were really a thing). Clips of Barack appearing to call her 'Mike' haven't helped in this regard.

Ah, those video clips. Like the ones proving that Obama's original election slogan, "Yes we can", reveals itself, if you get the cadence just right, in reverse speech as "Thank you Satan". Like all those clips of Biden aides saying "President Obama" and then apologising for the gaffe. Like those TikTok clips of a smug pastor singing a ditty about Obama being gay. Like the clips of Obama talking in Pizzagate code about Joe Biden's tastes.

So a picture and a thousand words in a single package, over and over again: perfect. Of course, the proverbial integrity of visual evidence is hard to hold onto when the video is a deepfake and the words are provided by ChatGPT. Nonetheless, it may seem, when we get to the same stage of next year, that we were witnessing the ghosts of presidents past, present and future; a coded carol, a reminder from the people who run the world that we very much don't.

www.elitedaily.com/news/world/12-year-girl-discovers-president-related; https://truthmafia.com/tommy-truthful/apocalypse-obama-leave-the-world-behind-2023-film-decoded/

SATAN VERSUS SANTA

The Satanic Temple gets in on the US festive season, while Russian cannibals are freed to fight in Ukraine

SATAN PLACE

The Satanic Temple, which specialises in provocative actions to challenge the erosion of the separation between church and state in the US, rather than actual demon worship, caused an outcry by putting up a display in the Iowa State Capitol building in Des Moines. The Temple had taken advantage of a system that allows organisations to stage displays in the Capitol through an open application process that does not discriminate on "the basis of religion or ideology". Their structure involved an altar containing the "seven fundamental tenets" of the Satanic Temple and the group's seal, surrounded by electric candles. Behind this stood a life size goat-headed idol of Baphomet wearing a red cloak and holding a black and red ribbon wreath with a pentacle in the centre, topped with a mirrored sculpture of a ram's head. Iowa State Representative Brad Sherman objected to the "disgusting display" in an open letter, maintaining that it violated the State constitution, and Governor Kim Reynolds called the altar "objectionable", but said: "In a free society, the best response to objectionable speech is more speech." Lucien Greaves of the Satanic Temple explained that the piece was not intended to offend Christians but was created to give other religions more representation in public forums. "People assume that we're there to insult Christians and we're not," he said, adding, "It's certainly a greater evil to allow the government to pick and choose between forms of religious expression." However, Michael Cassidy, 35, of Lauderdale, Mississippi, wasn't interested in arguments about religious freedom. He travelled to Iowa specifically to attack the installation and succeeded in damaging it beyond repair, resulting in his arrest for Criminal Mischief in the 4th Degree. However, the Satanic Temple elected to keep the remains of their display in place for the rest of their allotted period, saying "We ask that for safety, visitors travel together and use the Seven Tenets as a reminder for empathy, in the knowledge that justice is being pursued the correct way, through legal means. Solve et Coagula! Happy Holidays! Hail Satan!" *huffingtonpost.co.uk, 13 Dec; kcrg.com, 14 Dec 2023.*

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

THE SATANIC TEMPLE / FACEBOOK

TOP: A Christian man prays in front of the Satanic Temple display in Iowa's State Capitol. **ABOVE:** The Temple's Christmas Tree in the National Railroad Museum.

HAIL SANTA!

The Satanic Temple also managed to troll the conservatively minded in Wisconsin over Christmas by getting an entry into the Christmas tree display at the National Railroad Museum in Ashwaubenon. The museum has an annual tree festival with 66 organisations presenting trees displaying decorations related to their causes, rather than the traditional Christmas images. The Satanic Temple adorned theirs with red lighting and beads, pentagrams and various ornaments, with one reading, "Hail Santa", which drew predictable outrage from some sections of the visiting public. Museum CEO Jacqueline Frank acknowledged that there had been concerns raised about the tree, but it survived the holiday season rather better than did the Iowa display. *foxnews.com, 23 Nov 2023.*

CANNIBAL PARDONS

Rather more traditional Satanists have been causing a stir in Russia. Denis Gorin, 44, a convicted murderer who claimed Satan inspired him to kill at least four people and eat the flesh of one of them, has been pardoned by Vladimir Putin and released from his 22-year prison sentence to join the Russian military fighting in Ukraine. Gorin was originally convicted of murder in 2003 and imprisoned for seven years. On release, he fatally stabbed the brother of a man with whom he had been in pre-trial detention, and later admitted cutting the legs off the corpse which he washed, put in a refrigerator, and ate. He went on to carry out further murders with his brother in 2011 and 2013, before the law caught up with him and he was sent to a penal colony. Putin is also said to have pardoned Nikolai Ogolobyak, a member of a Satanic gang from the city of Yarodlav who killed and dismembered four teenagers in 2008. The gang then fried and ate their victims' organs, earning them long sentences for murder, robbery, and desecrating a corpse. According to his father, Ogolobyak spent six months serving in Russia's 'Storm Z' detachment, returning home with injuries that mean he is unlikely to continue his military service. However, having fought in Ukraine, he has earned the right to remain free. *newsweek.com, 23 Nov 2023.*

Lust in Space

NIGEL WATSON catches up with the growing literary sub-genre of Alien Romance and its top authors

There is a whole science fiction/fantasy sub-genre where the central theme is a love affair with an alien – a kind of raunchy Mills & Boon with an extraterrestrial vibe. A good example is *Submit: A Sci-Fi Alien Warrior Romance (The Sky Clan of the Taori Book 1)* by Tana Stone, which has this synopsis:

"I was bought to be a pretty pawn in my alien captors' twisted entertainment. But the gorgeous, horned alien who saves me from death is no pawn – and he's determined to beat the hunt. But is he rescuing me or claiming me as his prize?"

Zenobia Renquist's *Pet's Pleasure*, re-released in 2022, features a "purposeful abduction where the heroine is sold as a pet". Renquist – who when not writing Alien Romance fiction is author D Reneé Bagby – told me: "The aliens in that story see humans as intellectually and technologically inferior so think nothing of taking them and keeping them as pets, like a cat or a dog someone would pick up off the street.

"The main themes of the stories are usually fish-out-water, adaptation, and survival all while falling in love. For my title *Alien Mate Experiment* I wanted an abduction that was completely accidental with no possible way to get the heroine back to Earth, so she just has to make the most of her new life while hoping the beings who took her are nice."

ABDUCTIONS

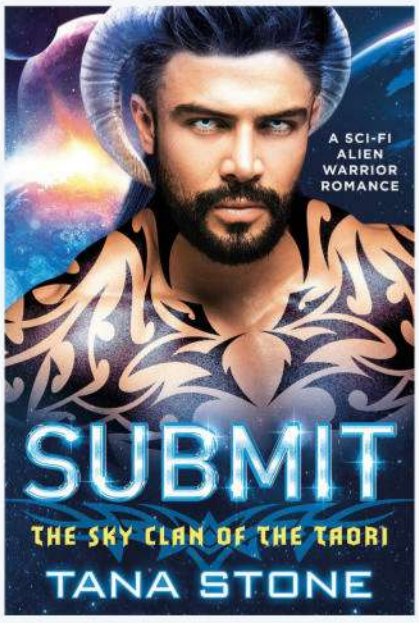
An abduction is also a main feature in *The Space Traveller's Lover* by Omara Williams. She provides the following synopsis of the plot:

"Ten thousand years ago, an alien race was driven from Earth by ancient humans. Now they have returned to Earth using perfect human replicas to understand and eventually control the human mind. Stronger, invincible, immortal, and with a technical superiority beyond comprehension, the aliens are fuelled by a zest for revenge while plundering Earth's remaining resources.

"The aliens have remodelled themselves into a genetically superior race and removed any feelings or emotions they consider a weakness. They don't feel fear, guilt or remorse, and most importantly, they never fall in love.

"A headstrong and ruthless alien soldier develops an intense obsession with Erin, a bright young human student with a mysterious past. He decides to bring Erin into his world, changing all the invasion plans to be with her, just for his pleasure. But Erin can see through the soldier's bleak soul and falls madly in love with him, eventually doing the unthinkable to try to change him against all the odds."

"Many readers prefer aliens with extra arms and legs, horns, tails, tentacles and so on"



ABOVE: Author Omara Williams signs copies of her Alien Romance novel *The Space Traveller's Lover*. **BELOW LEFT:** Alien hunks in Tana Stone's 'sci-fi alien warrior romance' *Submit: The Sky Clan of the Tabori*.

Omara adds: "Many themes can be invented and explored in the specific case of alien romance: unrequited love, impossible love, and fatal attraction. Once aliens meet humans, their different origins can play a decisive part in a unique plot that could not possibly happen had the lovers been just humans.

"Science-fiction is the perfect backdrop for creating exotic and outrageous new worlds, conjuring fascinating ideas of advanced civilisations, and confronting our own doubts and fears while exploring how we would react to the unexpected in this mysterious and seemingly infinite universe we inhabit.

"The readers have the freedom to place themselves inside this imaginary environment and experience feelings outside their ordinary lives while dreaming

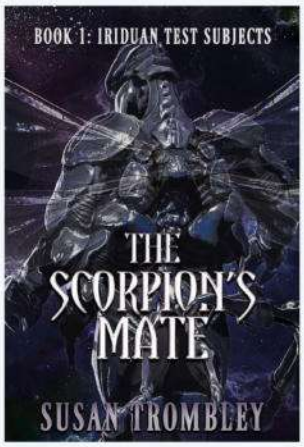
ABOVE: Alien Romance authors Zenobia Renquist (left) and Susan Trombley (right).

about what they would do if it happened to them."

Zenobia Renquist observes that: "Many readers and authors of Alien Romance prefer aliens who aren't human-looking. Extra arms and legs, horns, tails, tentacles, reptilian, and so on. Readers want to feel they are reading about a true alien encounter, not just some hunky guy painted green or blue. In some cases, the further away from humanoid the alien character gets, the more readers enjoy the story."

"I love talking alien romance", says Susan Trombley. She is the author of numerous books in the genre, including T*he Scorpion's Mate* in which the heroine is "abducted by aliens and dropped into a research facility, where a genetically-engineered alien soldier chooses her as his life-mate."

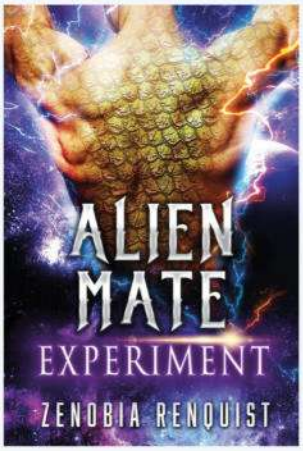
Susan enjoys writing Alien Romance fiction because "There are so many themes within our sub-genre, and what attracts readers to our stories varies drastically from one reader to the next, so I would not want to speak for any other readers than myself, other than to offer potential possibilities."



"As both a reader and an author, my draw to Alien Romance has always been characters and culture that are vastly different from our own," agrees Zenobia Renquist. "I love world-building and try to imagine how a culture on another planet would have developed differently from us. I'm a *Star Trek* fan from way back and got into *Doctor Who* in the Eccleston years (though Tennant's 10 will always be *my* Doctor). Encountering the cultures those shows created was always a treat."

INSPIRATIONS

Omara Williams, who has a degree in Nuclear Engineering and is a software manager, says: "I've always been fascinated by science and technology and the intense emotions of love stories. Hence, I found myself wondering 'how powerful can love be?' and decided to write my book to precisely answer that.



"I hope to immerse the reader in an imaginary world full of fascinating landscapes, but with the real possibility that it could all be true. The emotional rollercoaster rides of destruction, happiness and love are intertwined, eventually falling into place in a mesmerising story of defiance and triumph against all odds."

Susan Trombley aims to change and challenge our expectations. She says: "My books involving alien species that are familiar to the general public as myth or urban legend are based on generic concepts behind the ideas of alien abduction, visitation, conspiracy, etc. In most cases, my stories are intended to challenge preconceived notions about such topics by offering alternative perspectives, fictional as they might be. There is far more to my story intentions than this, of course, as those of us who love science-fiction romance take our genre very seriously, and always seek to imbue our stories with all the thematic richness and meaning that can be found in any other celebrated genre of literature."

Omara Williams admits: "I have read about many alien abduction cases. I did not use any of them in my book. There is an alien abduction in my book, but it is very original and unique to the book's story."

"My Alien Romance novels are pure fiction," says Zenobia Renquist. "No personal accounts to draw on. If only. I do believe there is intelligent life out there, and the proof of such is that they stay far away from Earth."

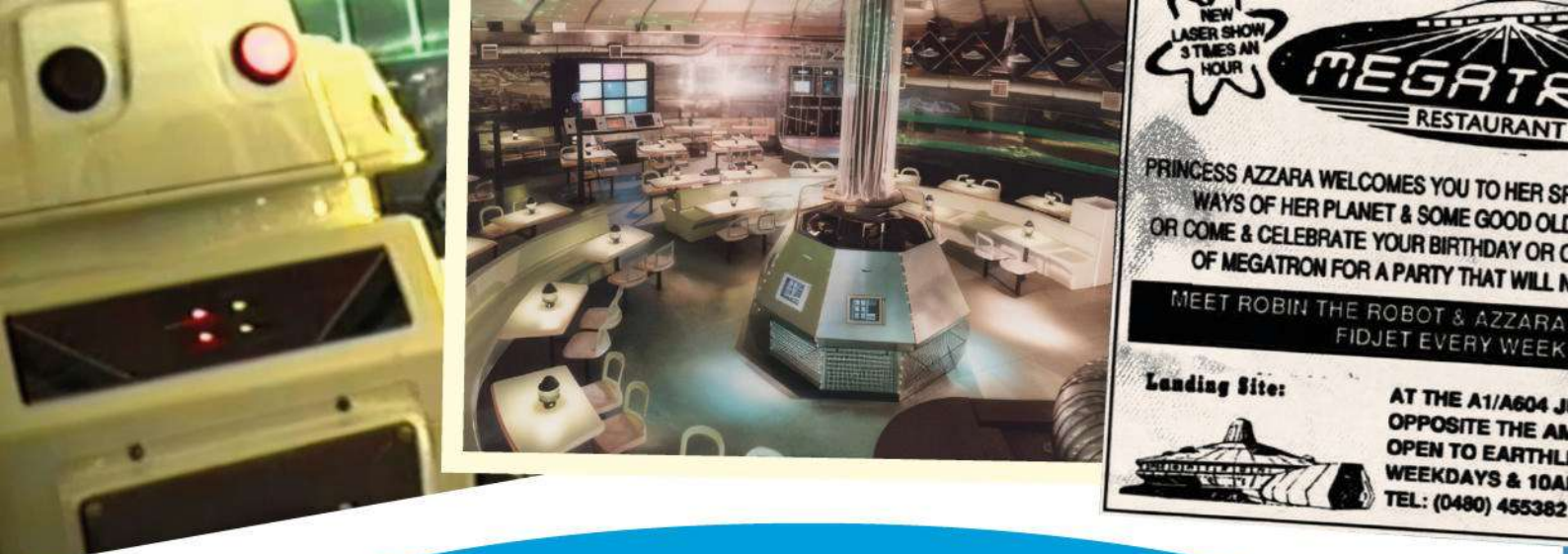
Susan Trombley confesses that she is "inspired by so many different things that I could write an entire book about my inspirations alone. I am, myself, an avid reader of fiction in many different genres, as well as being endlessly fascinated by the natural world and ancient history, both of which I find deeply inspiring.

"I have not heavily researched specific abduction cases, but I would not feel right about basing any fictional romance on someone's real life experience, as I understand that such experiences can be very traumatic. I also would not speculate as to the veracity of anyone's experience, having had no personal experiences of my own with which to compare stories."

You can find the authors' websites at:

https://susan-trombley.com/
https://www.omarawilliamsbooks.com/
https://zenobiarenquist.com/
https://www.tanastone.com/

Veronica Scott's 'Science Fiction & Fantasy Romance' blog carries weekly news about the latest Alien Romance literature, at: veronicascott.wpcomstaging.com



THE RESTAURANT

THE MEGATRON STORY

AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

In 1990, a very unusual restaurant opened outside an American airbase in rural Cambridgeshire. It was shaped like a flying saucer, manned by aliens and robots and haunted by poltergeists and werewolves. **TONY CONN** tells the strange, forgotten story of the Megatron

MEGATRON ROBOT: ROB CLAPPERTON / AMUTEC: DEBBIE HENDERSON / MEGATRON INTERIOR: GRAHAM CAMPBELL MAIN PAGE COLLAGE: ETIENNE GILFILLAN

On the evening of 26 March 1990, a strange visitor arrived in rural Cambridgeshire. The police control centre at Hinchingbrooke received multiple phone calls to report a flying saucer just outside the village of Alconbury. When officers arrived at the scene, they found exactly that: a huge spaceship sitting on the edge of the A604 and lighting up the sky. [1]

What had confused so many passing motorists was in fact the opening event for a new restaurant. This was the Megatron, a vision of the future that was not destined to last. This unique landmark would stand for just 18 years before being bulldozed to the ground – but it packed a lot into its short life, including some brushes with the peculiar.

BLUNDELL'S BRAINCHILD

The Megatron was a perfect recreation of a classic 1950s flying saucer. Like Doctor Who's TARDIS, the building created the illusion of being larger inside than out. As customers entered they would see futuristic flashing lights and lasers. Staff were dressed as aliens and robots. Diners could buy Special Star Fries, Chicken Nuclear Nuggets, Space Suit Spuds and Orange Jupiter Juice. In a pioneering innovation for its time, orders were taken via touchscreens on a central console, a feature that McDonald's would adopt 25 years later. There was nothing else like it, before or since.

The Megatron was the brainchild of local businessman Danny Blundell, father of Formula 1 driver Mark Blundell. Danny was an ambitious man, going from humble beginnings to owning a string of businesses. According to Mark, "My dad's mother died when he was little, and when he left school at 13 he couldn't read or write. My mum taught him all that later. His disadvantages drove him on to be the man he was. He started as a panel beater and sprayer, but really he was a wheeler-dealer, always working, always dealing." [2]

THE MEGATRON WAS A RECREATION OF A CLASSIC FLYING SAUCER

Bill : 033
****
* MEGATRON *
****

Wednesday, 08th August 1990 12:20:57

Code	Item	Price
010	Strawberry Space Shake	£1.00
022 x2	Special Star Fries	£1.60
021	Chicken Nuclear Nuggets	£1.90
011	Banana Space Shake	£1.00
018	Mega-Burger & Cheese	£2.25
004	Orange Jupiter Juice	£0.80
016	Space Suit Spud & Blistik Butter	£2.00
008	Fanta Orange	£0.90
015	Space Suit Spud & Protein Beans	£2.00

Total : £13.45

TOP: The Amutec Robot children's ride; the restaurant's space age interior, 1990; an ad from the *Saffron Walden Weekly News*, 29 Nov 1990. **LEFT:** A Megatron receipt from 8 Aug 1990. **FACING PAGE:** In a 1991 photo (centre) Rob Clapperton (aka Cyber-Tech) does his thing, while the 'Commander' (visible at top left) surveys the human diners.

For Danny, the Megatron would be his crowning achievement, the first restaurant of what he hoped would become a chain. He consulted architects and special effects artists, visited Elstree Studios to see the sets of *Star Wars* and *Aliens*, and planned to have working robots and holograms at the entrance to welcome guests.

The rural location seems an unusual choice until you consider the American airmen then stationed at RAF Alconbury. The Megatron was built right at the entrance to the base, and the sci-fi theme and diner-style food were aimed squarely at the Americans. Visitors even had the choice of paying in dollars or pounds.

WELCOME EARTH
MEGATRON
RESTAURANT
BIG IDEAS WRITTEN IN GLITTER." —NPR
SPACE
ODITY
CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SPACE OPERA
NEW
LASER SHOW
3 TIMES AN
HOUR

TOP: An exterior photograph of the Megatron taken sometime between 1990 and 1992. **BELOW:** A flyer for the restaurant explains how "Princess Azzara together with her pet alien Fidjet fled their home planet of Megatron to escape the evil slayer of the universe, Zorcas" only to find themselves in rural Cambridgshire.

TONY CONN

HAUNTED HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The small former county of Huntingdonshire, later absorbed into Cambridgeshire, has more than its fair share of uncanny stories. This is at least partly due to its position at the crossroads of central England. The Megatron itself was situated on Ermine Street, the Roman road leading from London to Lincoln and York. The Great North Road, and later the A1, would also pass through the area. Many local ghost stories refer to incidents on these roads.

At Nun's Bridge, Hinchingbrooke, the ghost of a nun is said to step in front of passing cars, causing them to swerve and crash. There is also a story of three ghostly crashed cars that silently burn at night, and of figures in military uniforms from various time periods. The airbase has too many ghost stories to list here, including poltergeists and disembodied children's voices. [3]

Matcham's Bridge, just south of Alconbury, took its name from an infamous murder that took place there in the 18th century. Gervase Matcham robbed and killed a young drummer boy and went on the run for several years, spending time in the Army and the Navy. One night, during a thunderstorm on Salisbury Plain, he encountered the ghost of the drummer boy and was forced to confess. He was tried and executed at Huntingdon, and was gibbeted at the scene of the crime. [4]

"The ragged corpse swung in its cage for many years. One freezing night, a group of lads drinking at the Brampton Hut dared another boy to offer Matchem [sic] some hot broth to keep out the cold. The boy accepted the wager and, climbing a ladder, put the broth to the corpse's lips. As he did so, another youth, hidden nearby, sepulchrally whispered 'Cool it, cool it'. So great was the shock that the horrified boy fell off the ladder, and was said to have been an idiot ever after."[5]

Some of the country's most infamous witch trials also took place in the area. Just a few miles from Alconbury is the village of Warboys, where Alice Samuel and her family were accused of witchcraft in the late 16th century. They were tried at nearby Huntingdon, which just a few decades later would also host Matthew Hopkins, the Witchfinder General. Hopkins is thought to have been responsible for the deaths of over 100 innocent people in his travels around East Anglia (see **FT198:30-36, 367:32-39**).

Incidentally, the Megatron would later be dubbed "the witch's tit" by locals, due to its appearance.

MILITARY MONSTERS

From 1937, large swathes of farmland around the villages of Alconbury, Great Stukeley and Little Stukeley were requisitioned to create an airfield for the RAF. From 1942, it was used by the USAAF for bombing runs into Europe, beginning a relationship that would continue for many decades. The heavily populated base came to have a major effect on the local community, boasting many amenities the area otherwise lacked.

In the 1970s, several American airmen

ABOVE LEFT: The Megatron and robot. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A futuristic touch screen, which you could use to order your Nuclear Nuggets. **BELOW:** Megatron architectural model, 1987-89. **BOTTOM:** The *Cambridge Daily News* reports on how the restaurant's opening alarmed locals and "sent police dashing to look for little green men".

reported seeing a werewolf-like creature inside the perimeter of the base. The Hard Stand Monster, or Beast of Alconbury, was witnessed in what is now the Monks Wood nature reserve and on at least one occasion was fired upon. [6]

One of the most dramatic stories about the creature describes a crewman dying of fright, trapped in his plane's cockpit overnight, with claw marks later found on the canopy. No contemporary records of this story exist, and it resembles similar tales the airmen might have heard while serving in West Germany (see "The Morbach Monster", **FT329:30-36**), so its authenticity is doubtful.

One account describes two sergeants on night patrol: "As they approached the tower, they came face-to-face with a hairy figure. The dogs stopped in their tracks, absolutely terrified, frantically trying to get away… The truck arrived just in time to see the creature, whatever it was, climbing over the security fence, where it was last seen entering North Woods." [7]

One man, known only as Wes, said, "I encountered a werewolf (for want of a better term) in England in 1970. I was 20 years old when I was stationed at RAF Alconbury. I was in a secure weapons storage area when I encountered it. It seemed shocked and surprised to have been caught off guard and I froze in total fright. I was armed with a .38 and never once considered using it. There was no aggression on its part.

"I could not comprehend what I was seeing. It is not human. It has a flat snout and large eyes. Its height is approximately 5ft [1.5m] and weight approximately 200lb [90kg]. It is very muscular and thin. It wore no clothing and was only moderately hairy. It ran away on its hind legs and scurried over a chain link fence and ran deep into the dense wooded area adjacent to the base.

"I was extremely frightened, but the fear developed into a total commitment to trying to contact it again. I was obsessed with it. I was able to see it again a few weeks later at a distance in the wooded area. I watched it for about 30 seconds slowly moving through the woods." [8]

Nick Redfern and Linda Godfrey have gone so far as to suggest a definite connection between werewolves and military installations, based on numerous other examples. [9]

RICHARD PENDELL

RESTAURANT LIGHT DISPLAY SPARKS ALERT

Martian mystery . . . police phone lines were humming with reports of flying saucers landing at Alconbury. Picture: Dave Parfitt.

1631905

STARTLED residents in the Huntingdon area sent police dashing to look for little green men after calls claiming a UFO had been sighted.

Locals put police on alert for green men

Control staff at Cambridgeshire police headquarters at Hinchingbrooke went to the scene after several people telephoned to say they had seen a flying saucer.

But fears were dispelled when police reached the scene, on the A604 at Alconbury, to discover that a new roadside restaurant based on a space-age theme was staging a promotion.

Owners of the restaurant, Megatron, which opens today, staged a special laser light show to mark the opening.

Mr Mark Lynn, a spokesman for Megatron said: "The skytrackers are used in America. We wanted something different to get people to know we were here, and it certainly worked.

"We had a steady stream of motorists stopping off to see what was going on. We'll use the search lights again periodically to let people know we're still here."

The service station, built in the shape of a flying saucer, can cater for 160 people.

Insp Tony Fechter from Cambridgeshire police headquarters said the police received inquiries from some national newspapers.

Others have drawn links between the Hard Stand Monster and the Hell-Hounds of Peterborough, mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, or East Anglia's Black Shuck (**FT17:12-13, 195:30-35, 251:22-23, 412:58-59, 429:66-68**).

Huntingdonshire did not escape the Satanic panic of the 1980s and early 1990s (**FT348:48-53, 349:46-50**). Evangelical group the Reachout Trust claimed that occult activities had increased locally by 50% between 1980 and 1990, Huntingdon being particularly affected. One of their concerns was the influence of the burgeoning home video market. In 1990, the group's area director, Tony Sarjant, said: "We are finding that children as young as eight are meddling in the occult. And those in rural areas soon become bored and so turn to videos. But even more disturbing is the evidence we have found in at least

one local playground of children playing levitation, where they use their mind power to lift someone off the ground."

According to several people who went to school in the area, this was nothing more than the 'levitation game' (also called 'Light as a feather, stiff as a board'), in which a group of eight or so children would lift another off the ground, their combined strength making the person feel as light as a feather. The county council carried out its own investigation of ritual activity in 1989 and found little cause for concern. [10]

EUGENE OLIVER

UFOS OVER ALCONBURY

RAF Alconbury continued to be important throughout the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. It was home to a nuclear bunker nicknamed 'the Magic Mountain', tours of which are now available to visitors. In its day, this bunker acted as a communications hub for TR-1 reconnaissance aircraft (better known as the U-2 spyplane).

The presence of nuclear weapons at Alconbury has been suggested as a possible explanation for numerous UFO sightings near the base, although military aircraft – secret or otherwise – must be possible culprits. As early as 1950, ufologist Donald Keyhoe suggested that UFOs were drawn to Earth due to the development of the atomic bomb. [11] Many contactees have relayed messages about the need for nuclear disarmament and world peace before humanity can be accepted by the extraterrestrial community.

Peterborough resident Paul Satchell reported seeing a triangular UFO moving in the direction of RAF Alconbury. On a clear, dark evening in the late 1980s, he was walking with a friend in Peterborough. They looked up when they saw lights in the sky. At first, they thought it was a helicopter, but it made no noise.

Mr Satchell described the craft as a black triangle with white lights at each corner and a pulsing red light in the centre. He judged it to be a few hundred feet above the houses, moving slowly southwards. It seemed to emit no sound of its own, but there was a strange, electrical hum in the air. The object then moved rapidly towards the east and disappeared, the whole incident lasting less than a minute. He suggested that it might have been an experimental stealth aircraft.

Adam King related an even closer encounter to me. In the spring of 1994, he and his girlfriend were in the village of Glatton when they saw five or six red orbs in the sky. They hovered momentarily in front of the car. Two of the orbs then sped towards each other and flew off in different directions. There followed a complex display from the objects, which seemingly put on a show for the couple. They then appeared to land behind some trees about 50m (164ft) away, at which point Adam became scared and drove off. Five minutes later, he returned to the same spot to find the objects gone.

RAF MILDENHALL & LAKENHEATH 50 MILES
Scene was at night when dark with a clear sky
Mid to late 1980's
UFO changed direction very fast 90° to here then vanished
Two or three solid white lights One red pulsing light no noise hovering slow towards RAF Alconbury direction
RAF Alconbury US Airforce Base 16 miles this way
Kirkstall

PAUL SATCHELL

TOP: Paul Satchell's UFO sighting. **LEFT:** The main entrance of RAF Alconbury. **BELOW:** The robot outside the restaurant in 1991.

At some point, the couple noticed that they were missing time, 50 minutes passing in what felt like a few minutes. King later underwent hypnotic regression and recalled going aboard a craft manned by the usual Greys. He declined to go into more detail about this part of the experience.

'FLYING SAUCERS'

One of the most unexpected stories about the Megatron was related to me by local man Terry Pinner, who came forward out of the blue and told of an exorcism aboard the spaceship in the early 1990s.

At that time, staff had started to refuse to work evenings. They said that knocking sounds came from the walls, objects moved by themselves, and cups and saucers flew through the air – flying saucers on a flying saucer! Megatron's owner Danny Blundell was sceptical at first, but one night, when he had stayed late to catch up on some paperwork, he heard footsteps following him.

Terry Pinner was familiar with local history. He had grown up in the area, his father's farmland becoming part of the new airfield in the 1930s. He recalled that the Megatron site lay on what used to be a road leading to a temporary mortuary at RAF Alconbury, an idea that seems to be confirmed by old maps.

In 1943, a tragic accident took place when the 95th Bomb Group were loading bombs onto a B-17 Flying Fortress. One of the bombs detonated, killing 19 men and injuring a further 21. Mr Pinner suspected that the poltergeist activity in the diner was the

STUART HUDSON

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ARCHIVES SERVICE

ABOVE: The Megatron after its transformation into a McDonalds restaurant, 1999. **BELOW:** Alien mascot Fidjet looking somewhat worse for wear 1991.

result of restless spirits whose last journey had been along this road. He offered to connect Danny Blundell to someone who could free these lost souls.

I had little hope of finding those involved in the exorcism (more properly called a blessing, as it involved a place rather than a person). Since 1975, every Anglican diocese has had 'spiritual deliverance teams' trained in both mental health and religious ritual, but their actions are usually kept strictly confidential, even the identities of the practitioners being difficult to ascertain. The same applies to the Roman Catholic Church.

I contacted churches of every denomination, as well as Francis Young, historian and folklorist at Cambridge University, and Darren Mann, who runs the online Paranormal Database. [12] Despite their help, the trail seemed to run cold. That was until Kim Robinson, president of Huntingdon Spiritualist Church, came forward to say that they were the ones involved with the 'exorcism'.

A medium from the Church said that the Megatron had an "unsettling atmosphere". She believed that several "ley lines" converged on the site, echoing the convergence of roads in the vicinity. The medium also said that she encountered the spirit of a man whose clothes were two centuries out of date. He told her to "go away quickly, as it's not a good place to be." According to Mr Pinner, the phenomena ceased immediately after the Spiritualists visited the premises.

Incidentally, Rob Clapperton, who performed as a robot at the Megatron in the early 1990s, went on to become a paranormal investigator and psychic medium himself. I had the pleasure of accompanying him on a ghost hunt and listening to his recordings of Electronic Voice Phenomena. Rob still performs as a robot at events around the country and makes all his own costumes. We have raised the idea of going back to the Megatron site to investigate.

A MEDIUM SAID THE MEGATRON HAD AN "UNSETTLING ATMOSPHERE"

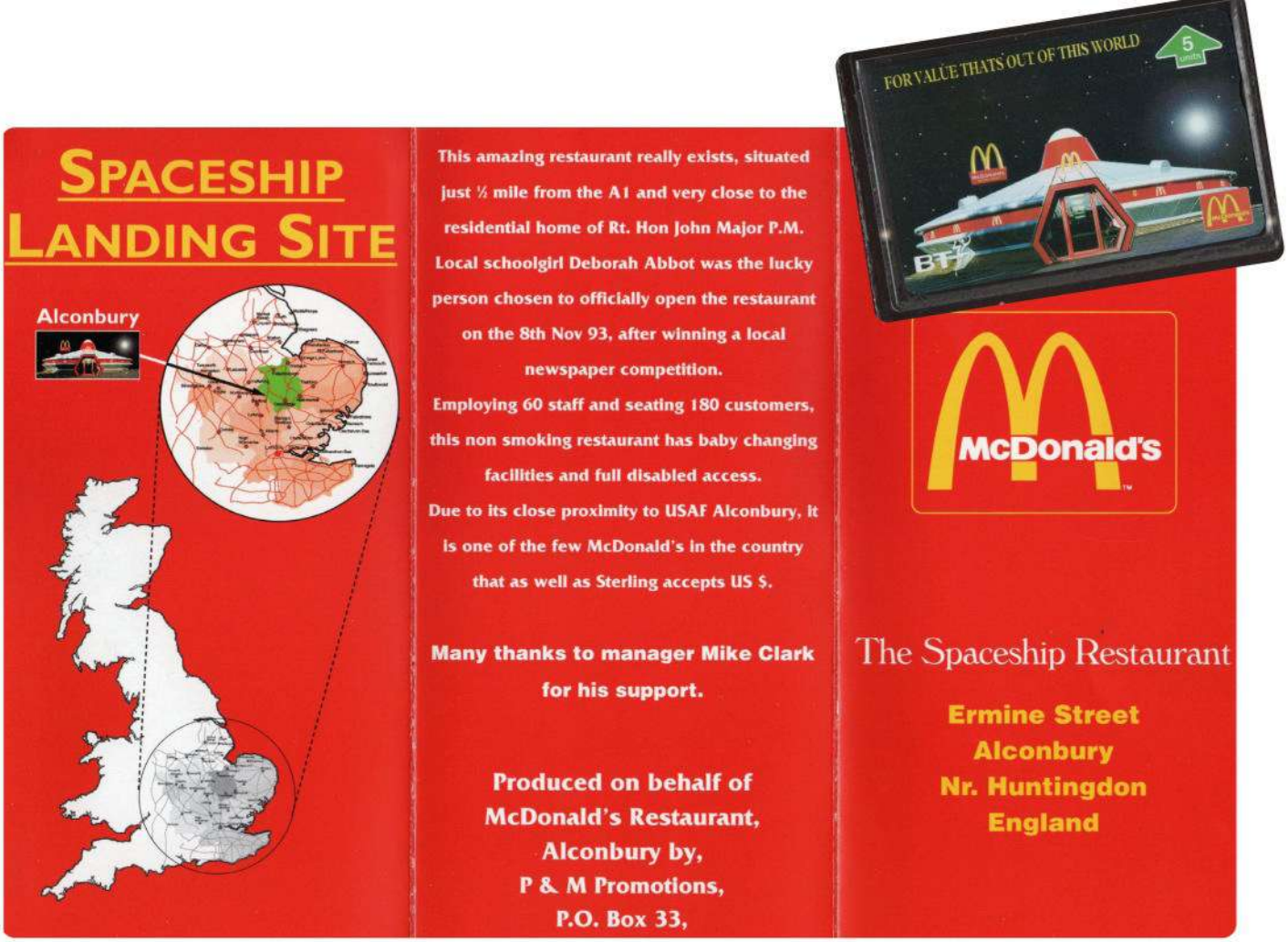
STUART HUDSON

DECLINE AND FALL

The Megatron was not to last as an independent business. Large overheads and dwindling sales led to its closure in 1992, after just two years of operation. In 1993, it reopened as a McDonald's, with most of its unique features stripped out. It closed for the last time in 2000 and lay derelict for several years. In 2008, attempts to have the building listed seem to have led to it being hastily bulldozed instead, a blatant act of cultural vandalism. The site now hosts a self-storage business, the foundations of the Megatron still visible under the shipping containers.

As for RAF Alconbury, it was slowly wound down from the mid-1990s and was sold to developers in 2009. It is now home to the Alconbury Weald housing development and New Shire Hall, the new headquarters for Cambridgeshire County Council. More interestingly for us, the former airfield is also home to the East Anglian Astrophysical Research Organisation (EAARO), which monitors meteor activity in our atmosphere and plans to build the UK's first permanent SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) facility. [13]

After the demise of the Megatron, Danny


SPACESHIP LANDING SITE
Alconbury
This amazing restaurant really exists, situated just ½ mile from the A1 and very close to the residential home of Rt. Hon John Major P.M. Local schoolgirl Deborah Abbot was the lucky person chosen to officially open the restaurant on the 8th Nov 93, after winning a local newspaper competition.
Employing 60 staff and seating 180 customers, this non smoking restaurant has baby changing facilities and full disabled access.
Due to its close proximity to USAF Alconbury, it is one of the few McDonald's in the country that as well as Sterling accepts US $.
Many thanks to manager Mike Clark for his support.
Produced on behalf of McDonald's Restaurant, Alconbury by, P & M Promotions, P.O. Box 33,
FOR VALUE THATS OUT OF THIS WORLD
5 units
BT
McDonald's
The Spaceship Restaurant
Ermine Street
Alconbury
Nr. Huntingdon
England

ABOVE: A limited edition 'Spaceship McDonald's' BT phonecard from 1993; the accomanying copy is keen to point out that Prime Minister John Major is a neighbour.

Blundell continued to work on various business ventures, leading to an amusing run-in with the BBC. In 2001, Manhattan Corporation, a company Danny ran alongside Sandra Merrington, released a van-cum-motorhome that had been specially adapted to create a more spacious interior. Of course, they called this vehicle the 'Manhattan TARDIS'. The following year, the BBC attempted to block their trademark application.

In their defence, Manhattan Corporation argued that they were in a different line of business to the BBC. They also argued that they had come to their acronym by a completely different route, TARDIS standing for 'Touring And Recreational Driving In Safety'. This cheeky tactic worked in Manhattan's favour and they were able to continue using the name. [14] Only a small number of the vans were actually produced, so snap one up while you can!

A VERY BRITISH FUTURE

So, why did so many strange events seem to happen in and around Alconbury? Can it really be put down to a convergence of supposed ley lines? I suspect that one factor is its position in the centre of the country, with many travellers passing through on their way to other destinations. The two most likely places to witness ghosts and other entities are in bed and on long car journeys. These are times when one is likely to experience hypnogogic hallucinations, dream imagery combining with reality in the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep (hypnopompia is the state one goes through when waking up).

THE MEGATRON IS A PLACE THAT EXISTS IN THE REALM OF MEMORY

England is proud of its rich folklore traditions. We have long recorded and preserved strange tales. The wealth of stories in Huntingdonshire could reflect the fact that it lay at the crossroads of a long-lived, densely populated country that has an active interest in such things. I would love to hear from anyone with an alternative hypothesis.

One question remains: Why is a novelty restaurant from the 1990s of such interest now? The Megatron sparks intense nostalgia, including the second-hand nostalgia of the younger generation. Greg Roberts's 1993 video of the venue evokes a world that only exists on VHS, right down to the timecode in the corner. [15] The Megatron is a place that, aside from the odd photographic artefact, exists solely in the realm of memory and wistful longing; the Portuguese concept of *saudade*, and the German *sehnsucht*, are relevant here – longings for the past, the future and the ideal.

There's also a tinge of the uncanny. The nostalgia, kitsch, and liminality of the Megatron suggest philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', later re-interpreted by Mark Fisher in a series of essays collected in the book *Ghosts of My Life*. [16] Hauntology refers to a range of concepts regarding the futures we were once promised and by which we are now haunted. Applied to art and media, it is an æsthetic of mourning, of voices coming to us from beyond the grave in the form of sample culture, pastiche, and retrofuturism.

The Megatron also reflects the time and place of its birth. It represents a Very British Future, one that combined Space Age optimism with the mundane realities of British life and glimpses of contemporary pop culture – one man remembers stopping off for breakfast in the early 1990s, still tripping from the previous night's rave. Ultimately, everyday people are at the heart of the Megatron story.

Sadly, Danny Blundell passed away a few years ago, but a documentary film is now in production that will tell the whole story of the Megatron and of Danny himself. *The Man Who Built a Flying Saucer* will include interviews with many of the people who worked there and knew Danny personally. The filmmakers have also gathered a wealth of exclusive material, including several amateur videos shot inside the spaceship. Search for 'Megatron Memories' on Facebook or Twitter to learn more.

GEOFF SODEN

TOP: The end of the Megatron as the 'flying saucer' is demolished in 2008. **BELOW:** The site as it looks today, the foundations covered in shipping containers.

Before the documentary comes out, Megatron fans can enjoy Catherynne M Valente's upcoming book *Space Oddity*, due for release in May 2024. A sequel to 2018's Hugo Award-nominated *Space Opera* – which has been greenlit for a movie adaptation from the makers of *Jurassic World* and *La La Land* [17] – *Space Oddity* will feature the Megatron as a central plot device as the characters from the first book use it as a time machine. I was glad to help Ms Valente with her research and can't wait to read the book myself.

The Megatron's story is far from over.

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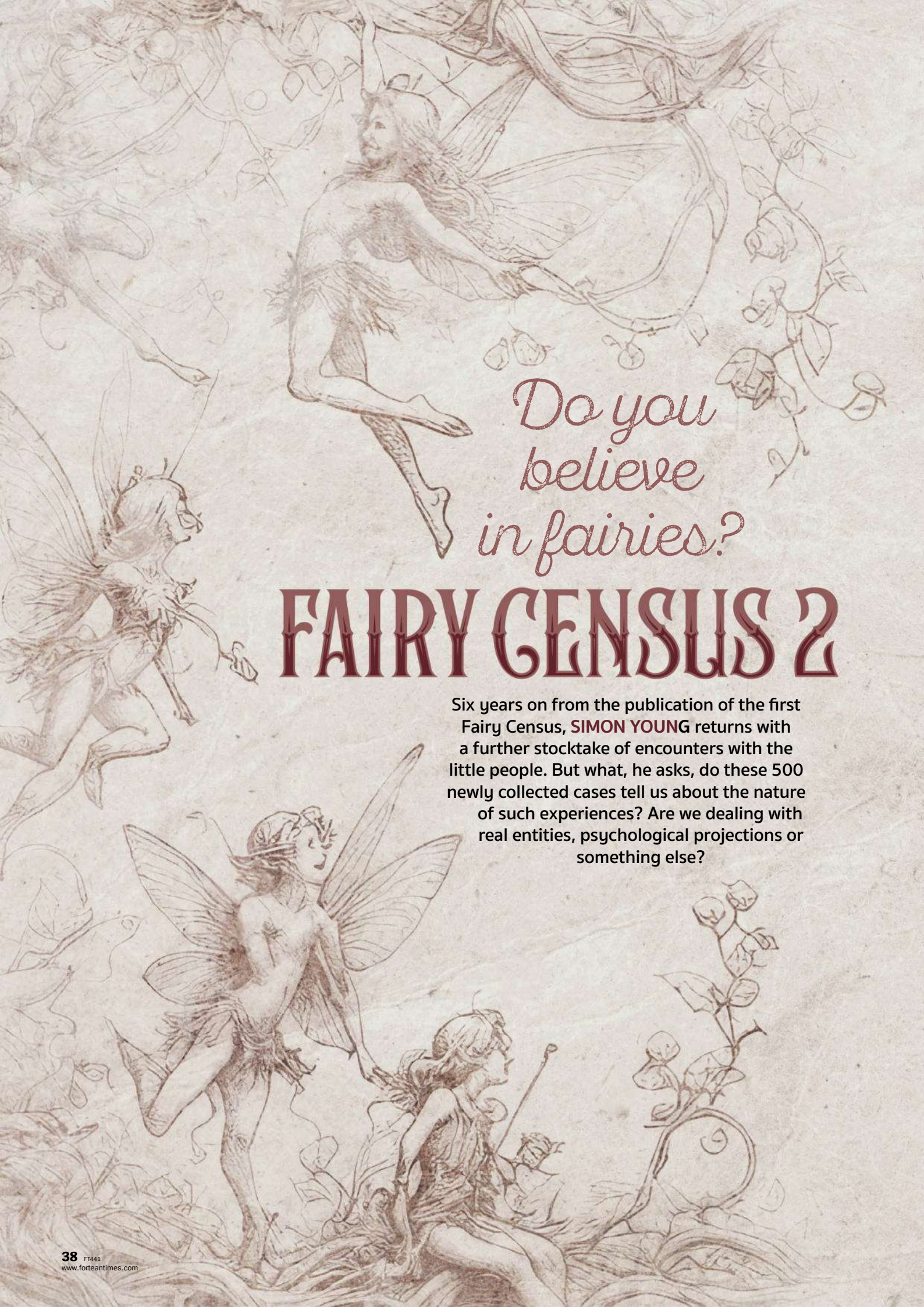
TONY CONN

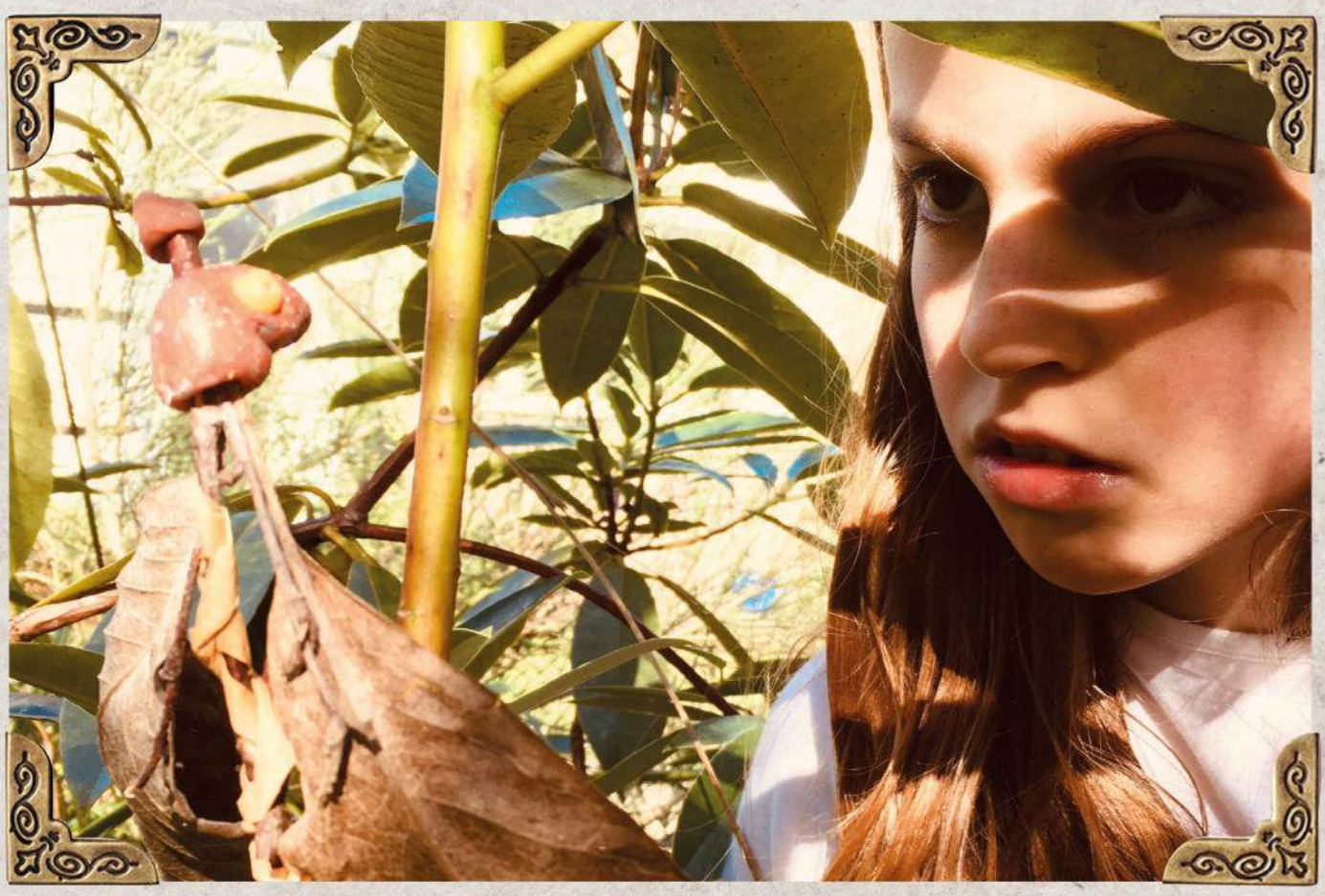
TONY CONN is a journalist and filmmaker with an interest in local history, strange beliefs, and flying saucer restaurants. He is currently working on a feature-length documentary about the Megatron, whose progress you can follow if you search for 'Megatron Memories' on Facebook and Twitter.



Do you believe in fairies?

FAIRY CENSUS 2

Six years on from the publication of the first Fairy Census, SIMON YOUNG returns with a further stocktake of encounters with the little people. But what, he asks, do these 500 newly collected cases tell us about the nature of such experiences? Are we dealing with real entities, psychological projections or something else?



RYAN SHIRLOW

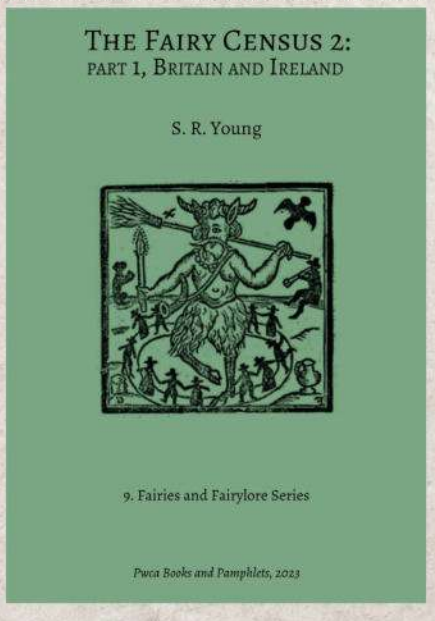
ABOVE: Emily Shirlow, the daughter of FT regular Ryan Shirlow, comes across what appears to be a half-leaf, half-insect fairy at the bottom of the garden.

Fairy Census 2 is now out. Six years in the making, some 200,000 words long, with 500 new fairy experiences, it is available at all good booksellers. Well, actually no, it isn't. But you can get it (just like *Fairy Census 1*) in a free downloadable pdf; 2) in a free downloadable Excel sheet; 3) or, for those who like to read without screens, as print-on-demand volumes.[1] The campaign continues. The aim is to reach 2,000 open-source fairy experiences that are amenable to statistical analysis.[2] We are now half-way up the mountain. There will be at least two more *Fairy Censuses* in the next 10 to 15 years. I also hope to produce, in that time, a *Historical Fairy Census*, collecting 500 cases from about 1700 to World World II.

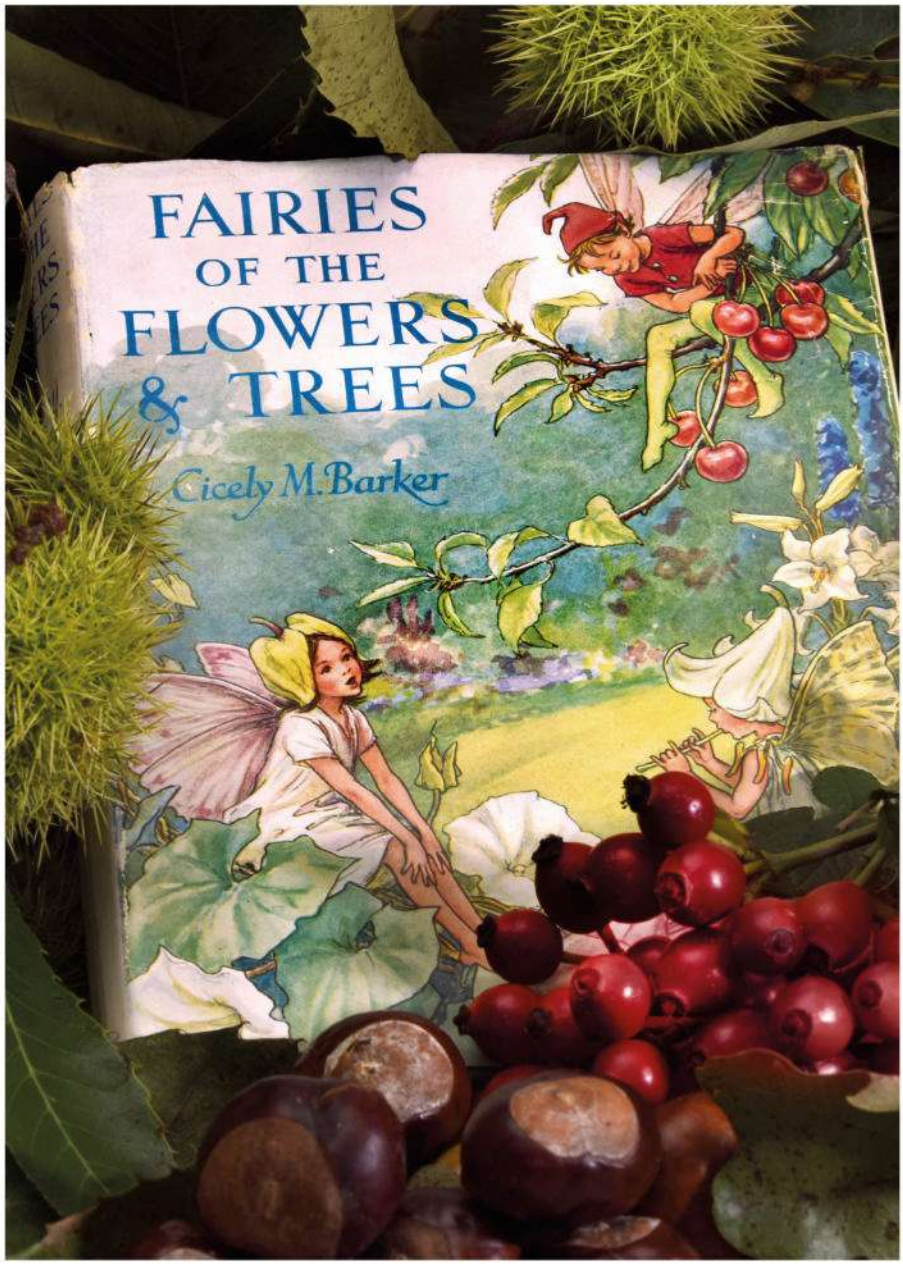
When I started the *Fairy Census* in 2014 I wrote: "Both Evans Wentz and Marjorie Johnson [earlier fairy collectors and my inspirations; see **FT321:30-45**] wanted to prove that fairies exist. I do not have this ambition. I, instead, want to get a better understanding of who sees fairies and under what circumstances by looking at the stories and the sightings."[3] This is a sentence that I cite when I submit articles to peer-reviewed journals. It has the virtue of being true. But while not wanting to prove that fairies exist – I mean, do they? – I often find myself thinking about the reality (or otherwise) of the experiences to be found in the *Fairy Census*.

When asked by interviewers about the fairy encounters I collect, I lock my legs around the fence I'm sitting on and answer with some version of: "I don't know if I believe in fairies, but I believe in fairy experiences." In other words, I believe in the sincerity of witnesses. Again, this has the virtue of being true. I overwhelmingly believe those who write to the *Fairy Census*. Typically, the interviewer prevaricates a bit, then we move onto the history of fairy wings or the fifth Cottingley photograph. Today, though, I'm in a screwy mood. I'm going to stand up on the fence I've been sitting on and see which way I fall. I'm doing this partly because I want to kick up debate, and partly because when I get to *Fairy Census 3* (or *4* or *5*) I want to have some words down, so I can laugh at an earlier version of myself.

> "I WANT TO GET A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHO SEES FAIRIES AND UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES BY LOOKING AT THE STORIES AND SIGHTINGS"



Before we dive in, a couple of warnings about the 1,000 experiences recorded in *Fairy Census 1* and *2*. This is not, of course, a scientific, random sample of the almost eight billion people who presently inhabit the globe. The vast majority of these experiences come from English-speaking countries: particularly, Britain and Ireland (34.8%); the United States (46.4%); Canada (4%); and Australia and New Zealand (6.9%). Many of the 7.8% that come from elsewhere are actually English-speaking tourists on holiday in, say, Iceland, France or the Philippines. In some senses, this is disappointing. But it guarantees a level of uniformity in terms of the culture and the expectations of our respondents. Another remarkable point that is worth stressing is that women are massively over-represented in the *Census*: 70.5% of



TIM MANDER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Fairies identified with nature – the endearing and enduring 'Flower Fairies' of Cicely Mary Barker.

responses were from female witnesses.[4]

It would take a long book to go through all the data in the first 1,000 entries in the *Fairy Census*. However, in the interests of sharing with *FT* readers (who have been among the most generous contributors), I'm going to concentrate on four minor fairy types. Think of them as case studies. These are: the tresp; the orno-ento fairy; the flat fairy; and the wood diva. I hope that these categories give a useful insight into some of the curiosities of late 20th and early 21st-century fairy encounters.

THE TRESP

I've broken down modern fairy types from Britain and Ireland in a chapter in a recent book.[5] The two most important are the SWFs (small, winged fairies) and the dwomes (dwarf-gnomes) who are responsible, respectively, for about 37% and 27% of the British and Irish results in *Fairy Census 1*. The first tend to be tiny, winged, feminine, elegantly dressed and 'delightful': they are forever dancing and smiling. The second tend to be male, child-sized, scruffily dressed, and reluctant to interact with humanity. This division, note, is not there in the fairies or elves of the Middle Ages or the fairies of the early modern period. How far back does it go? I don't know, but at least to the Great War.[6]

FROM THE 19TH CENTURY WE HAVE THE IDEA THAT FAIRIES ORDER NATURAL PROCESSES, THAT THEY ARE 'NATURE SPIRITS'

Enough of SWFs and dwomes and let's get to tresps, the tree spirits, that in *Fairy Census 1* score about 7% for Britain and Ireland. These are usually tall and thin, tree-shaped or with tree appendages (branches etc); and they move awkwardly, perhaps because they are not really supposed to move.[7] There follow some examples of tresps to give you a flavour.

"A very large (twice human height) humanoid creature, which appeared to be made out of sticks, jumped out of a tree about 30 metres [98ft] from me" (§54); *"I spotted what looked like a tree rushing across fields towards us"* (§57); *"a creature like a person but stretched upwards, overly thin and tall, and with its head coming to a slightly corkscrewed point with some smaller branching points coming from it"* (§97); *"I noticed a winged being leaning up against the side of a sycamore tree. He was as tall as the trunk, maybe 15 feet [4.6m]"* (§181); *"Tree branch 'hair' and a slender grey-brown body"* (§276); *"This looked like part tree but moved and danced round"* (§555); *"As I looked up into the trees, I saw the form of a massive man, with a thorny head"* (§731).

My central concern with tresps is their origins. You could argue that dwomes are the bastard, poorly-dressed children of Oberon: the last survivors of Shakespeare's fairies. You could perhaps trace the SWFs back to mid-Victorian art: soap tins and pantomime transformations. Remember that the first winged fairies were only painted in the later 1700s. But what, on Earth, is the inspiration for tresps? From the late 19th century we have the idea, in theosophy, that fairies order natural processes, that they are 'nature spirits'. From that point on it makes sense that fairies can be cast as the spirits of flowers, trees etc. In the Middle Ages, fairies had been understood much more generally to be connected to fertility.

However, if we assume that trees have spirits, why do they take on these gangling, arboreal forms? One possibility is that this is, well, the form they really do take in nature. But the obvious objection there would be, why do we have no descriptions like this from before the Great War? It is a good counter, and, in fact, I can find only vague parallels before the 1970s.[8] My guess is that there are two sources of inspirations for the tresps. The first is the artwork of Brian Froud and Alan Lee: they published their *Faeries* in 1978. Froud and Lee's genius in fairy art was to make the fairies they drew look like the environment the fairies inhabited with mushroom noses and bark-like skin. Cicely Mary Barker with her 'flower fairies' had experimented with 'naturising' fairies, but Lee and Froud made their fairies credibly grungy for the 1980s.

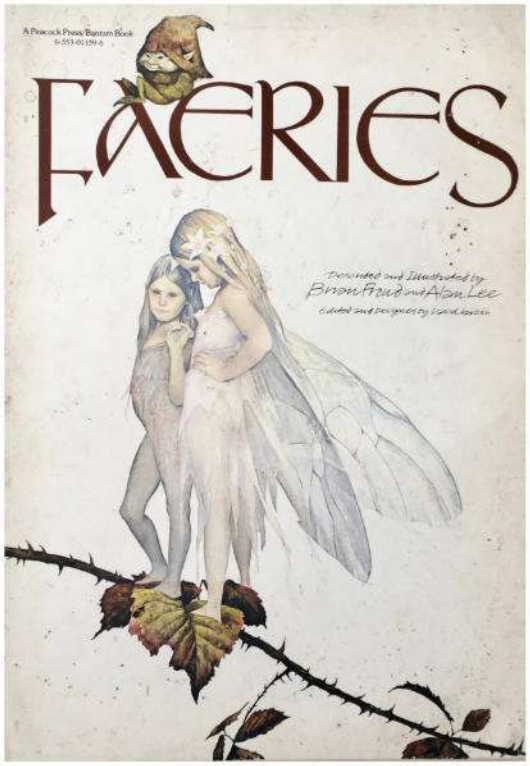
A second possible source would be JRR Tolkien and his ents. In *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien introduces these very large and tree-like protectors of the forest. They are able to speak and move, and they are known for their slow, deliberate manner.

LANDMARK MEDIA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Imagery derived from JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (particularly the film adaptations), such as the tree-like ents, seems to crop up regularly in contemporary fairy sightings. **BELOW:** A grungier vision of the fairy as nature spirit in Brian Froud and Alan Lee's popular *Faeries* book of 1978.

Millions have read *Lord of the Rings*. But hundreds of millions have seen the two film adaptations, both of which have very memorable ents. One conviction I've developed in the last decade is that changes in the supernatural are much more likely to come from visual than written cues. No one cares if you say that a fairy has wings. But if you draw it, people notice. I suspect those *Lord of the Ring* films have a lot to answer for…

But do the correspondents to *Fairy Census 1* and *2* know or care about Lee, Froud and Tolkien? The answer is yes. Seven of the 1,000 entries directly reference Brian Froud in trying to explain what fairies look like, one even using the short-hand 'Froud-like' for a fairy (§293). Four entries refer to *Lord of the Rings*; two to Gollum; one to hobbits; and one to Tolkien.[9] It makes sense for people to tie the impossible things they've seen to cultural points of reference: *"The easiest comparison would be to the portrayal of Samwise Gamgee in the film series Lord of the Rings"* (§336). But what if it is more than that? As one contributor put it: *"I was well aware of Froud's work before the experience and have often wondered whether that predisposed me to see this type of entity"* (§606).



THE ORNO-ENTO FAIRY

I estimate that between seven and 10 per cent of the responses to the *Fairy Census* could reasonably be classed as orno-ento fairies. In long form, this is the ornithological-entomological fairy and I mean by this a sighting of a fairy that could credibly be a bird or an insect. For me the orno-ento fairy has three characteristics: it is 1) small (typically smaller than a hand); 2) it is seen flying; and crucially 3) it is only seen briefly. Here is a typical example from a hiker in New York State.

"While walking through I came across this area of trees that felt different from the rest of the woods. I remember walking over and a small shadow flittered across my vision [and I] couldn't get a good glimpse as it fluttered by. The wings looked like the wings of a dragonfly, and it looked pretty human-like" (§826).

Here is another example from a driver in California.

"There was a green area with trees to my left. I saw the fairy fly past my windshield and do a little flip. It made a noise that sounded like 'wahoo' and it was a male voice. The fairy was small and really bright white/yellow. I wasn't able to make out any features because it moved so quickly" (§679).

Human perceptions are deeply flawed in perfect conditions. Seeing something "fly past my windshield" is not anywhere near perfect conditions.[10] For responses like this we really need a panel of entomologists and ornithologists: in the same way that those interested in UFO encounters consult with astronomers to rule out the Moon or Venus. Important questions for these two entries might include: what noise do white-yellow insects in California make; and what kind of dragon-flies are there in New York? Of course, if the person believes that they have a fairy in front of them, that is enough for me. I'm interested primarily, as already noted, in who 'sees fairies and under what circumstances', not whether fairies are fairies. But still…

Very rarely we get to look down the telescope from the other end. On 26 September 2020 I got this fascinating email from a

LEFT: Insect-like fairies take to the air in The Old Hall: Fairies by Moonlight by John Anster Fitzgerald 1875. **BELOW:** A somewhat alarming insectoid fairy in a video that has been doing the rounds on YouTube since 2008. **BELOW LEFT:** A Gasteruptiid wasp – a possible identity for some sightings of tiny fairies?

correspondent with a background in natural history:

"Walking through woods in Cornwall a couple of weeks ago, on a warm afternoon, I got a very good, long look at an insect flying around. Its rear legs hung down directly below it, and some combination of colour markings and angles made it look like it had boots on these legs. Two smaller front legs were held forward like arms, the head has held up with long antennæ, and the fluttering wings were at right angles. I did not notice what should have been a long thin body held out behind – either because the rest of the effect was so striking, or it may have been missing, or because it was parallel to the ground. This thing was orange-red, and about an inch in length (tall!). So you can visualise what I saw was a tiny upright humanoid, with wings, flying about like Tinkerbell!"

My correspondent suggested a *Gasteruptiid*.

Or what about this example that involves neither bird nor insect from *Fairy Census 1* (§336)? Once more we are in New York State:

"Myself and two friends (all 18 to 21) went to a golf course one evening with the intent to have a few casual beers… As we were walking down the fairway, we observed some creature walking up towards us from the opposite end. It was definitely dark out (probably about 9pm), but quite misty, and the mist was reflecting sufficient light from nearby homes and streetlamps that the silhouette of the creature was quite visible even at 50 yards. We continued to approach each other for several minutes, my friends and I trying to figure out what it was that was walking towards us (with an apparently human gait, but much too short

to be human). We literally stopped walking (us and the creature) only when we were within perhaps three feet [90cm] of each other. I swear, I thought I was looking at some kind of very little man (maybe 18 inches [46cm] in height), and was quite stunned and literally speechless. I bent over to make sure I had a very clear look at what I thought I was looking at, and my face and his (the creature) were, at one point, perhaps 12 inches [30cm] apart. I was still speechless, but the friend closest to me blurted out, 'It's a little man.' I turned to look at him, and then past him to my other friend, who immediately followed up with, 'It's a skunk!' I turned back to the creature, and it now appeared to be a skunk. So, the creature turned and ran back the way it came while we turned and ran back the way we came, and the event ended."

Either the witnesses misconstrued a skunk or, as the witness believes, a little man *became* a skunk. I'll return to this example in my conclusion.

FLAT FAIRIES

If you want really weird fairies, I'd recommend the flat fairies. It is true that this is a tiny category, but we start to see here, I think, how perceptions get, well, stretched in fairy encounters. Let's start with §160 from the Isle of Man. This visitor to the island is in a taxi in the 1970s:

"I saw in the headlights and several feet ahead of the car three strange forms going across the road. They were not humanoid in shape but looked as though they were flat rather than 3D and had a jagged outline about eight inches [20cm] or so high. Strangely they appeared in the headlights to be bright pink!... Six to eight inches [15-20cm] tall and maybe five inches [13cm] broad but like a flat sheet of fluorescent pink card with jagged edges. However, they moved in a procession of three from the left to the right of the country road."

Here we have a reminder that 'fairy' has become a dumping ground for anything that is 'high strange' or 'deep weird', i.e. outside our normal categories. The logic seems to go something like this. Is it a ghost? No. Is it an alien? Unlikely. No sasquatches on the Isle of Man... Ah, then it must be a fairy! Supernatural systems need these miscellany categories because experiences understood as being supernatural are so varied and often so bizarre. But the labels change. If something truly weird happened in the 1600s, everyone shouted 'demon'. If something truly weird happens in the later 20th or early 21st century the witnesses, more often than not, cry 'fairy'.

The pink cards from the Isle of Man are abstract. Usually flat fairies make more con-

DINESH HEGDE / CREATIVE COMMONS

cessions to our human need for form. For instance, in the 1970s a child in Australia watched a butterfly land on a thistle:

"At first I saw a large pink butterfly on a thistle on a dry riverbank… On approaching it, the butterfly folded like origami, first into a flat looking faerie, then into a pretty little pixie" (§474).

In the same decade, a little girl in distant Michigan occasionally woke in the night to a procession of first nation fairies outside her front door:

"The people in this 'parade' were made of brightly coloured, geometric shapes. They were like three-dimensional screen prints or woodcuts, but they looked very human, not cartoonish."

This, instead, is a woman in Surrey in the UK in the 2000s (§586). She, too, woke in the night:

"There were five slim figures, possibly around 12 to 15 inches [30-38cm] tall… their hands joined up in the air and they appeared to be dancing around in a circle. Although they were in human form, the bodies and the limbs seemed very long and thin… It was almost as though they were paper cut-outs."

Elongated and thin limbs and bodies – the El Greco effect – are very common in supernatural sightings going back to our earliest records (including arguably our earliest art). In some forms of trance, figures elongate. Consider the fairies in these two hallucinogenic-aided fairy encounters: the fairies *"appeared flat and two dimensional to me. I could see them, but they looked like black sketches on a white page. They would shuffle about slowly and not really be aware of what they were doing, like Shades"* (§655). *"My experience occurred the very first time I took magic mushrooms. I noticed these small two-dimensional creatures walking in procession in the grain of wood on a chest of drawers"* (§189). Perhaps this business of the 'cut-outs' and origami fairies is just an extreme version of the El Greco effect?

LEFT: *The Vision of Saint John*, by El Greco. The curiously elongated figures found in the artist's paintings find an echo in numerous accounts of supernatural encounters.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK

THE WOOD DIVA

It is one of my favourite fairy experiences. In the 1990s two sisters and a dog were out exploring in the early afternoon *"in the woods behind our grandparents' house"* in Arkansas. At a certain point the younger sister (aged six) had run a few yards ahead and the elder sister, a teen, noticed that off to the side a woman had appeared among the trees:

"She was wearing a long, white dress and was walking toward us, but there was no noise of crunching leaves or anything. It was completely silent and still. The birds and wind didn't even make a sound. She was beautiful and seemed to glow a little like she was a little brighter than everything else around her. She looked at me smiled and waved… Her hair was dark blonde and was long and loose… and seemed to be brighter than her surroundings like she maybe glowed a little." The dog was understandably upset by this mysterious presence and "made some kind of noise and pushed against me." The elder sister looked down at her dog and when she looked up again the mysterious woman had disappeared (§217).

"ALTHOUGH IN HUMAN FORM, THE BODIES AND LIMBS SEEMED LONG AND THIN AS THOUGH THEY WERE PAPER CUT-OUTS"

It is a great account. But it needs to be read in association with two jarringly similar entries in that 1,000-record archive. Consider now this experience from Lancashire in the UK in the 2000s. A woman in her twenties and her friend are walking in a wild English wood in the late morning. Suddenly, down the slope, a lady appears *"with dark hair and off-white long tunic... Almost a shining quality"* (§70). The young female hiker feels compelled to follow the woman into a small birch glade and there is some kind of (telepathic?) communication between them. *"Her voice was almost like it was phasing in and out of our reality."* Or consider §198. We are in the forest of Nova Scotia after midnight in the 2010s. Two friends (a man and a woman in their twenties), are walking when *"we both saw a woman step out of the woods... She had a long silver, purple and green gown and looong [sic] hair with seven stars in it. She seemed to be made of light with what might have been a crown on it."* The woman walks into a tree and then a shadow like a spider emerges…

There are differences, yes, but consider the common elements. We have: 1) woods; 2) two people walking (at least one female); 3) a human-sized female fairy appears; 4) she is luminous with billowing skirt and long hair; 5) both people, or the dog and the sister in the first account, see the fairy; 6) there is some limited contact with the fairy in two accounts (hand wave/words); 7) the fairy then vanishes (or becomes a spider). You could argue that in 1,000 records you are bound to have 'overlaps' like this: fairies are seen in woods, many fairies vanish, etc. But actually there are relatively few human-sized fairies, and most are male. Indeed, in our small sample of single human-sized fairy women these are half of the entries. Examples where two witnesses share an experience are, meanwhile, rare (17%). This is the kind of bean-counting you can indulge in when you have fairy records in Excel.

Some of the few others in this category (single, human-sized female) have elements in common with the wood diva. Two young girls in *"rural Pennsylvania"* in the 1990s (§853) are deep in the forest exploring:

"Out of nowhere we began to hear a woman's melodic voice singing in the woods. It didn't seem to be coming from any one direction, and it was quiet at first slowly creeping up to this very loud, haunting song ringing through the trees, filling every inch of the woods." The girls run home. No woman is seen but the voice suggests, to me at least, human-sized. Or there is §313 from Missouri in the 2000s. The witness, in her fifties, feels *"compelled"* to get out of her car: as she is about to drive to work. She is in front of her house *"in woodland"*. A woman steps out from behind a tree. *"She was dark haired… She was wearing some sort of headband that came around her forehead. After stepping out from behind the tree she seemed to look around the woods, as if she had just arrived and was getting oriented…*

ANN BELLANTI / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The 'wood diva' – a mysterious, human-sized woman, usually long haired and wearing a long dress – appears in a few accounts of fairy encounters. Is she an emerging story form? **FACING PAGE:** The problem of fairy wings: socially-determined, secondary elaboration or a deliberate effort by fairies to allow us to 'process' them?

she turned and looked at me… A female with long hair in a long dress." There is then some missing time…

Here we have not only a common vision of a fairy (as, say, with tresps). We have something far more powerful. We have a story. Two people meet a vanishing woman in a wood. There are other examples of these emergent narratives in the *Fairy Census*. For instance, §80 details a balloon of 'fairies' in bowler hats coming to take a child away in 1950s London. §525 has a hot-air balloon *"full of tall, elegant, bejewelled beings with peacock blue skin and shimmering golden hair"* coming to take a child away from rural Dorset in the 1970s. All my instincts scream that these narratives, like, for instance, the Men in Black in UFO-lore, are important. The supernatural is congealing into useful forms.

CONCLUSION: FALLING OFF THE FENCE

So the tresps, the wood divas, the orno-entos and the flats: are these real experiences? I'll offer here two considerations and then a guess. First consideration: I take for granted that human categories in the supernatural are largely bogus. The idea that five pieces of pink cardboard shuffling across the road should be a 'fairy' rather than an alien or a ghost or Spring-heeled Jack just doesn't make sense to me. "Yes, there is a great Archipelago of the Impossible with the Island of the Undead, the Island of Fairy, the Island of Demons, the Island of Little Green Men Who Visit Your Bedroom, the Island of Hairy Hominids… But, in the end, these islands are all clearly just the peaks of a single submerged continent (which Plotinus long ago mapped)."[11] We are not really asking whether fairies exist, then, but whether the supernatural exists.

> "AFTER STEPPING OUT FROM BEHIND A TREE SHE SEEMED TO LOOK AROUND THE WOODS, AS IF SHE HAD JUST ARRIVED AND WAS GETTING ORIENTED"

Second consideration: supernatural forms change. I suspect that I would disagree with a number of Patrick Harpur's convictions, but I know no writer who has been better able to articulate the impishly evolving forms of the impossible.[12] The fact that tresps seem not to have been seen prior to about 1970 doesn't speak against their existence. The supernatural has always, and always will alter the form it takes. What also, though, I think has to be accepted is that there is an element of social conditioning or cloaking. That is why counting references to Tolkien in the *Fairy Census* or looking for UFO motifs in old episodes of *Star Trek* matters.[13]

Take the invention of fairy wings. A Richard-Dawkins-style materialist could argue that supernatural experiences are socially determined: the winged fairy has become part of the supernatural model labelled 'fairy' and so we see winged fairies. A wimpy fence-sitter might wonder whether we don't see the supernatural through socially coloured spectacles: we graft wings onto a fairy after 'secondary elaboration'. A fairy seer could argue that entities deliberately take on forms that we can process: if you want wings, the entity hisses, you are going to get them. There is a great deal of difference between these three positions. But whichever option you plump for, social templates of the supernatural are vital in understanding impossible experiences.[14]

And 'fairies' (aka the supernatural)? Even after these obvious (?) premises I find myself scrambling for the discomfort of the fence. However, my guess, for what it is worth, is that supernatural experiences are visionary dialogues with the environment.[15] At some points, certain people seem to enter into communication with an element of the world around them (a tree, a room, a path) through an encounter with *IT*. I don't know whether *IT* is something created in the brain

or something that comes out of the environment or whether *IT* is not perhaps born of the brain and environment working together. But *IT* is there before us in the branches of the glade or in the corner of the bungalow kitchen.

It is possible that in creating *IT* parts of the environment might (apparently) come to life. The tree stump might become the gnome or switch back again; the little man may become the skunk. Sometimes an insect or a bird (see the orno-ento fairy) may become the vehicle for an encounter, in the same way that dry grass can catch fire or catch the sunlight. To say to someone who saw a 'fairy' fly past their windscreen that they had a 'fairy' experience might not then just be a psychological fact (though it is certainly that). There might be *IT* in even the most banal-sounding encounters. There might be *IT* in self-induced trances, in dreams and hallucinogenic questing.

An encounter can be a sensorial experience (a sight, a smell, a noise) or it can be an interaction (a conversation, sex, violence) or it can be a story (a midwife hears a knock on the door in the middle of the night…). There is a gradation here and the conditions which allow an experience of *IT* to become an interaction or even an *IT* story are mysterious. In an ecstatic widely shared religious system I imagine that the leap up from sensorial experiences ("look, an angel") to a story ("he raised the dead") is relatively easy. In a deeply unarticulated belief system like modern fairy-lore there has not been the shared social or spiritual energy to create interactions and shared stories. This is why I find the wood diva and the balloon narratives exciting. Here a story bud seems to be opening before our very eyes.

But what if they are not true? What if the wood diva was invented by a committee that fed the stories one by one into the *Fairy Census*? What if the second balloon account (in *Fairy Census 2*) was inspired by reading the first (in *Fairy Census 1*)? I suspect that this did not happen. But like fairy researcher Janet Bord, I've wearily accepted that people lie about impossible experiences: "there are far more hoaxers and downright liars out there than we realise, *especially if we are not that way inclined ourselves*" (my italics).[16]

Here, in consolation, I remember the old Jungian saw about the patient who writes a long dream vision to trick his analyst. When the patient finally laughingly admits what he has done the analyst laughs back. "Do you think it matters? Do you think that this tells me anything less about yourself?"

And with that, bruised, I climb back onto my fence. There is nothing above that could not have been written by a maudlin materialist. But a maudlin materialist would not, as I have done here, 'Chase myths like moths, and fight them with a pin'. Nor would a maudlin materialist be pressing on to *Fairy Census 3*. We have about 50 responses already. Just 450 to go… And if you have your own best-guess about fairies in 300 or 400 words I'd love to read them. If I could get enough variety they would make for a fascinating appendix in a future *Fairy Census*.

For more on the first *Fairy Census*, see **FT321:25, 362:30-37**.

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NOTES

1 Downloads and other details are given on the 'Read the Fairy Census 1 and 2' page at the Fairyist. https://www.fairyist.com/survey/read-the-fairy-census-1-and-2/

2 The *Fairy Census* includes accounts from emails and parallel surveys. But only the entries that have come through the main questionnaire are judged to be 'amenable to statistical analysis': so far 846 out of 1,000.

3 This is in the introduction to both *Fairy Census 1* and *2*.

4 Is this because women have more fairy experiences or because they are more likely to report fairy experiences? Ethan Doyle White shares this comment (pers. comm. Dec 2023) after pointing out that men are more likely to express an interest in sasquatches and UFOs: "To my mind, this suggests that the imagery and æsthetic of particular beliefs/practices can have a specific gendered appeal. In modern pictorial contexts, fairies are usually presented in a manner that can be readily interpreted as feminine (most of them are female, not male, for instance), and this might be why more women report experiences with such entities."

5 Young, 'Fairy Ain't What It Used to Be: Traditional vs Contemporary Fairies', *Deep Weird: The Varieties of High Strangeness Experience*, ed. Jack Hunter (August Night Press, 2023), pp.189-210 at 201-203.

6 Frances Griffiths, the younger member of the Cottingley duo, saw in and around the beck in 1917 two categories, 'little men' and SWFs: Frances Griffiths and Christine Lynch, *Reflections on the Cottingley Fairies* (JMJ, 2009), pp.14-25. In fact, the first two Cottingley photographs were an attempt by the older cousin, Elsie, to represent both these categories.

7 The first person to identify the tresp was Meri Dickson, 'Fairy Encounters in 21C England', *Fairy Investigation Society Newsletter* 13 (2021), pp.54-61 at 57-58. Tresps should not, note, be confused with talking trees, lighted up trees, stump fairies or balls of light or small fairies in branches: other categories that could be individuated in the *Fairy Census*.

8 Is this a rare early tresp? Warwick Earl, 'Some Rather Weird Experiences', *Mid Sussex Times* (28 Aug 1923), 6: A man is trapped in a rainstorm under a tree. 'As the rain did not appear to be leaving off, I stepped out to continue my journey. The rain was, however, so heavy that I turned back to the tree which I had left only a few seconds before. Never shall I forget the terror which seized me on seeing in front of me, watching my movements with a malignant and horrible expression, a 'something' I can only describe as a 'thing'. Black and gnarled as a tree trunk, yet human in shape, it stood confronting me, with eyes blazing at me with a curious, baneful phosphorescent glow.'

9 An aside: there are six references to the *Harry Potter* universe, five in *Fairy Census 2* – generational change?

10 I have several regrets about the questions I asked respondents to the *Fairy Census*. But perhaps the principal one is about the duration of the experience. I gave these options: 'Less than a minute; One to two minutes; Two to ten minutes; Ten minutes to an hour; Many hours'. If I were able to change this question – but with half of the results in it is too late – I would break down 'Less than a minute' (36.1% of responses) into 'A split second'; 'A second to 10 seconds'; 'Ten seconds to a minute'

11 Simon Young, 'Confessions of a fairy hunter', *Times Higher Education Supplement* (29 Mar 2018).

12 I'd enthusiastically recommend Patrick's *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld* (Pine Winds, 2003).

13 Of course, cause and effect in these matters is hopelessly confused. If a respondent has a supernatural experience remarkably like one in, say, *The X-Files* does that mean that she borrowed it from the programme or that the experience emerged in her mind and in that of the scriptwriters independently? On the second point, my suspicion is that the trashier the writing, the more likely we are to get these new archetypal ideas. Counterintuitively, you are far more likely to get new 'stories' in trashy hack-written sci-fi comics than in Dostoevsky.

14 This is a paraphrase of my conclusion in Young, 'Fairy Ain't', 209-210.

15 I'd prefer to talk about 'landscapes', but so many experiences take place within buildings.

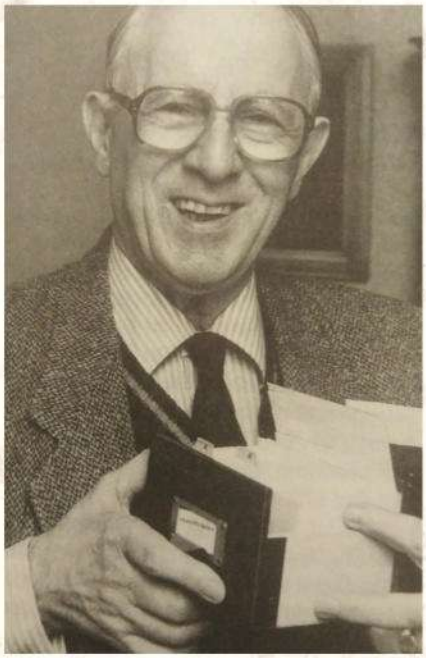
16 Janet Bord, 'Interview', *Fairy Investigation Society Newsletter* 1 (2015), pp.15-17 at 17. There are unquestioned examples of fairy malfeasance in the *Census*. See *Fairy Census 2*, 'Appendix Two: The New Forest Deplorables'.

THE GHOST SCRAPBOOKS OF TOM PERROTT PART TWO

The 1970s were a golden age for ghost stories in British newspapers, says ALAN MURDIE, and thanks to the late Tom Perrott, who collected newsclippings from the local press, we can step back in time to this haunted decade.

During the first half of the 1970s, Tom Perrott, as well as keeping his scrapbooks recording hauntings the length and breadth of Britain (see **FT440:28-35**), had also been keeping an eye on his own neighbourhood. Living at the same house in Muswell Hill that his father originally bought in 1943, he was well placed to see numerous stories unfold in the *Hampstead & Highgate Express* concerning the ghoulish antics and carry-ons over at Highgate Cemetery. This led him to start up a special scrapbook entitled 'Vampirology'.

He had also been monitoring developments in Dorset, the county of his birth, and became co-author with Rodney Legg and Mary Collier of *The Ghosts of Dorset, Devon and Somerset*. One Dorset haunting he rapidly came to question was that of Sandford Orcas Manor House where a collection of extraordinary spectres was being gushingly promoted by its eccentric tenant Colonel Francis Claridge and his wife. The couple boasted of sharing their home with 14 ghosts, including a lady in red silk, a dog, a monk, a suicide, an Elizabethan woman, and the shades of Sir Hubert Meldeycott and a seven-foot phantom rapist. This latter apparition "only appeared to virgins" ("How did you work that out?" Perrott asked). Colonel Claridge proved a temperamental character who erupted when challenged over his veracity and was even given to menacing sceptics and nay-sayers with an antique sword.[1] When enquiries failed to locate any first-hand witnesses to the colourful phantoms beyond the Claridges themselves, Perrott concluded all the ghosts were pure invention, dreamed up for a publicity scam.



LEFT: Tom Perrott with some of his 3,000 index cards detailing British hauntings.

SHOPS IN BRISTOL'S NEW KINGSWOOD SHOPPING CENTRE SAW STAFF RECOUNTING PECULIAR INCIDENTS

GHOSTS ON THE PREMISES

In January 1975 the owners of a plant hire business in Marshalls Lane, Wheathampsted, in Hertfordshire were alarmed by strange incidents. The apparition of a young girl was seen inside one of the barns of the plant hire business, vanishing when challenged. The surprised employee went and searched the barn, finding it empty – and there were no other exits. Following this, two employees refused to work on the premises after dark.

The phenomena were attributed to a murdered girl – the ghost of Ann Noblett, a 17-year-old student who had lived nearby and had disappeared on 30 December 1957. One month after her disappearance, her frozen body was found. She had been strangled and was believed to have been sexually assaulted before her body was placed and kept in a deep freeze. Her killer or killers were never identified. Eighteen years later, it was postulated Ann was returning in the month her body was discovered.

Mechanic Alfred Spink, who had taken part in the original search for Ann, reported that he had not believed in the ghost until he felt a physical contact: "I felt something brush my head. When I looked round there was nothing. I definitely know I was touched."[2]

Another employee, Bob Shambrook, stated: "There have been so many strange goings-on it must be true. The other night I was working late when one of the stable doors kept opening and shutting. I latched it securely but it kept opening and banging."

Overall, workers were more puzzled than frightened, but at other locations the hauntings were so bad that people fled.

In July 1975 the 'Brown Monk' returned to terrify hairdresser Mr Dennis Taylor, 47, of Hatter Street, Bury St Edmunds. A hooded, faceless figure about five feet (1.5m) tall appeared to Mr Taylor as he lay on his bed; as it glided towards him, he leapt up and moved very swiftly out of the room. (*Bury Free Press*, 11 July 1975).

In October 1975, Mrs Sandra Ovenden and other staff at Annabel Togs boutique in Bury St Edmunds were terrified by a monk passing through a wall in the direction of the Abbey early one morning. Female staff became so scared they refused to go upstairs to the toilet and instead used public facilities in the town.[3] In August 1976, shops situated in the newly built Kingswood shopping centre in Bristol all saw staff recounting peculiar incidents, described by a witness as including "footsteps on the stairs, display shelves disturbed and kettles boiling by themselves."

Post takes a trip into the land of the unknown

Story: NEIL CLEMENTS
Drawing: ARTHUR PROSSER

Ghost hunter takes lid

Terror

KEYSTONE PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Police officers at the site where the body of murdered student Ann Noblett was found in December 1958. In 1975, strange phenomena and the apparition of a young girl at a nearby plant hire business were attributed to her ghost. **BELOW:** In August 1976 the *Bristol Evening Post* reported on the mysterious incidents plaguing many premises in the newly opened Kingswood Shopping Centre. The *Post* suggested that the spirit of cricketing legend WG Grace might be responsible.

These manifestations all centred on a row of three shops – a baker's, a TV rental business and a newsagent – within the complex, which had opened the previous October. They stood on the site of a former doctor's surgery occupied by the brother of the famous cricketer Dr WG Grace (1848-1915), leading to (unprovable) suggestions by the *Bristol Evening Post* it was the great player himself reacting to the poor performance of the England team that summer.[4]

BORLEY REVISITED

Apart from ghostly monks, relatively few apparitions fitted the traditional British stereotypes. In September 1975 the *Ealing Gazette* promised much with the headline "Galloping ghost lost his head at Tyburn" (with the phantom head appearing in a moat annually on 1 March), but the story was probably a spoof.[5] In October 1975, a white-haired ghost materialised in the washrooms and toilets of the BBC broadcasting centre at Alexandra Palace. On 4 December, the BBC itself transmitted a serious and memorable programme, *The Ghost Hunters*, presented by Hugh Burnett. The highlight of the programme was a series of recordings made at Borley Church in Essex of banging sounds and sighs. This revived interest in Borley and its long-gone haunted rectory for the rest of the decade. Early the following year *Psychic News* offered an entrant for the British Poltergeist weightlifting record with "Borley Ghost Lifts Car". Mrs Doreen Wright told the *Spiritualist* weekly newspaper: "We saw my son's car lifted a few feet from the ground. It was locked with the handbrake on, yet it moved 12 feet [3.6m]." (*Psychic News*, 7 Feb 1976). Despite this, Mrs Wright added, "I want to go back even though last time I was terrified for days after our visit."

Bumpers from phantom of the surgery

14/8/76

BRISTOL EV' POST

14/8/76.

By DAVID NEWMAN

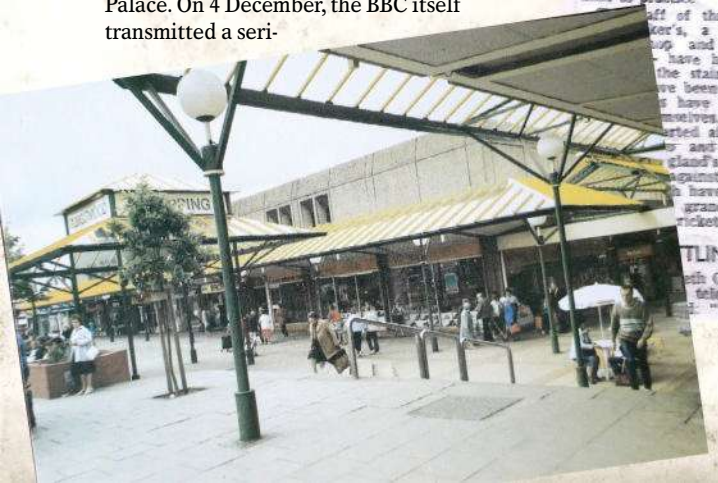
CALYPSO cricket, bongo-bashing fans and bouncers, bumpers and beamers are enough to make that giant of the Willow, Dr W G Grace, turn in his grave.

But, as far as three shopkeepers in Kingswood's new King's Chase complex are concerned, they don't need cricket fans to tell them about the restless Dr Grace—they have their own evidence.

It seems strange goings-on have been haunting the lives of shop staff in the Kingswood complex — built exactly on the site of the surgery where W G's brother, Dr E M Grace, used to practice.

divided about whether it is W G himself, his brother or merely an unfortunate patient.

When the shopping complex opened last October, a plaque depicting Dr W G Grace at the wicket surrounded by county cricket club badges was unveiled on the site.



In September a guardsman collapsed after seeing a horned statue seemingly spring to life at Windsor Castle. This stimulated discussions over whether he encountered a manifestation of the phantom Herne the Hunter, though an hallucination cause by fatigue seems more probable. [6]

In October 1976, two haunted hotels in Hastings, Sussex, made the news. At The Shovells guesthouse in All Saints Street, a lady in black sitting in a corridor had frightened guests; it was thought she might be the mother of Admiral Clowdsley Shovell. Ena Barry, the owner of the Washington Hotel in Devonshire Road, reported that there was a crying woman and two other phantoms on the top floor, along with sounds

Does the past still live at Borley?

When Harry Price first published his book: "The Most Haunted House in England," in 1940, painstakingly subtitled: "Ten years' investigation of Borley Rectory," the population of Borley was recorded as being only 121. Five years ago, this had increased only by nine. The 12th century church stands oddly undedicated, and stories of mysterious singing heard inside, still circulate.

Some friends of mine, whose experience prompted this article, described Borley as: "one of the most incredibly spooky, odd places we ever met."

The name Borley comes from the Anglo-Saxon Barlea, meaning "boar's clearing or pasture", recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. The manor of Borley was owned by Benedictine monks in the fourteenth century, and it is from these origins that the story first sprung, about a nun from the convent of Bures who fell in love with a monk at Borley.

Certainly part of a tunnel has been found, said to connect the Rectory farmyard with Bures; with a branch, or perhaps a separate tunnel, in the farmyard of Borley Place, an old house which stood opposite the Rectory. A secret passageway from Clare was reputed to meet the one to Bures somewhere in the Rectory grounds.

The Rectory was constructed on the site of several earlier dwellings—and a house has been built there since the fire which destroyed the building famous for its ghosts. Although no more, it was—and perhaps still is—to attribute to our hard past, than one which was actually in common use.

Nevertheless, his book quotes the strange experiences of many eminent people, including Dr. C. E. M. Joad, head of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology, Birkbeck College, University of London, who visited the Rectory and: "was considerably intrigued with the various pencillings (i.e. on the walls)." These were the Marianne wall-writings, said to have been produced by an unseen hand.

GHOSTLY NUN

Other phenomena were: the traditional appearance of the ghostly nun at dusk, of just after, on July 28 of each year, along the footpath skirting the lawn popularly known as "The Nun's Walk", the wall-writings; strange rappings; lights which appeared mysteriously and cold spots. At the end of the Nun's Walk was a cats' cemetary, near the stream at the end of the garden leading into a pond claimed to be the scene of a suicide by lovers of added local colour.

Built by the Rev. H. D. E. Bull in 1863, Borley first acquired fame when the Misses Bull claimed to have seen the nun in daylight on the lawn, a headless man—and to have been troubled by poltergeist activities. When Mr. Price carried out his intensive investigations, he catalogued an impressive list of phenomena and observers during the years prior to the Rectory's sudden destruction by fire at midnight on February 27th, 1939.

This disaster was allegedly foretold eleven months described as "formless." These ran in a one-way track, stoping at the wall running parallel to the Nun's Walk. Certainly parts of a female skull have been unearthed, but these were dated as two hundred years past the time of the fateful nun. Probably they were interred in the cemetary for victims of the Great Plague of 1666, which is in part of the garden. This was pointed out by a member of the Ghost Club Council, Mr. A. Peter Underwood in his later volume: "The Truth About Borley Rectory," published in 1959. There is talk that a skull was kept in the house for many years; but this was probably due to the whim of a macabrely-minded owner—or else an ex-medical student.

My interest in Borley was really rekindled by the last-minute, "completely unscheduled" trip by a party of friends, the members of a local psychic research club, in 1968.

Eight of them made a clandestine entry to the grounds, where they found: "nothing but footings, a chicken hut and what remained of the Nun's Walk." Setting up a base in a barn, they kept a most uncomfortable vigil from eleven p.m. till three a.m., during which: "almost everybody heard, sensed or smelt something odd." My informant was obviously quite sincere as he spoke—and he a hardened journalist, to whom reputed haunting for pure publicity's sake was nothing new.

"The bushes around the chicken hut made odd, semi-moving shapes. We sat our-

E. ESSEX GAZETTE CLACTON 2.10.75

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

WITCHCRAFT, black magic, voodooism, in fact, anything that comes under the heading of the occult, will be discussed and studied by the newly formed Clacton Ghost and Occult Research Society.

They also intend to investigate reported hauntings, poltergeist activity and supernatural happenings in the Clacton district and outlying areas.

Research will also be made into sightings of unusual objects such as "Unidentified Flying Objects" and even creatures in the category of the "Loch Ness Monster."

Founder members of the society, John H. Wynn, chairman, and Wesley Downes, secretary, believe that Clacton has its fair share of ghost stories and unexplained happenings. They intend to carry out serious investigations and to keep records of all such phenomena.

LEFT: Borley was back in the news in the 1970s, along with the newly-formed Clacton Ghost and Occult Research Society. **BELOW:** Peter Underwood and presenter Hugh Burnett outside Borley Church for the 1975 BBC programme *The Ghost Hunters*.

of unexplained footsteps. These stopped after the rooms underwent conversion. On several occasions she had walked into the lounge bar to be confronted by "a very fat gentleman sitting in the corner" who "melted away". (*Hastings & St Leonard's Observer*, 30 Oct 1976).

A case of a possibly fatal prophetic apparition manifested the same autumn. Mr Wilf Jones, 37, a steward at the Royal British Legion at Holtwhites Hill, Enfield, reported footsteps in the upstairs bar with noises like someone walking across the hollow stage "in what sounds like army boots" soon after moving there in October 1976. Glasses were disturbed and – another pub favourite – the flow of beer from pumps was interrupted. Mr Jones saw what he perceived to be the upper half of a man. The appearance of a disembodied torso tied up with a local rumour that a fireman had suffered an unnatural death inside the fire station, crushed by a tender, sometime after 1936 when the station had opened. Reputedly, a woman also died in the incident. A photo of a puzzled Mr Jones standing in the bar appeared in the *Enfield Gazette* on 23 December 1976 with the headline 'A Christmas Ghost Story'. "I've never been so scared in my life," wife Eileen Jones was quoted as saying. Just a week later came news of a strange sequel – Mr Jones had died quite suddenly, aged only 38. Had the apparition been a warning?

TROUBLED HOMES

In March 1977, in Swanley in Kent, 15-year-old Elaine Jones dug up a Victorian ring in the garden of the semi-detached council house where she lived with her family in Hart Dyke Road. Thereafter, over the next eight months, Elaine, together with her sister Linda, her brother and mother Mrs Joan Jones, 50, were all terrified by the figure of a woman in white appearing inside the house. Linda Jones, 23, saw the White Lady close up and said, "Her face was twisted as though she was in agony." The woman displayed on one hand a ring like the one Elaine had unearthed.

Eventually, in November 1977, local priest Canon Balance exorcised the house, sprinkling and marking each window with a cross using holy water. The family then said Communion and prayed for the spirit to leave. The predecessor of the Jones family, a Mrs Diana Honey, who had lived in the same house for eight years, recalled that "It felt cold and haunted all the time I was there. I was a nervous wreck but I never saw anything." She understood the previous occupier was a woman who died in childbirth, though how this related to the ring and the White Lady was unclear. The following year, another White Lady was reportedly scaring building workers at Moorseats, just north of Hathersage, Derbyshire, believed to be the inspiration for Moor House in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.[7]

Poltergeists continued to trouble properties. In May 1977, disruptive psychical phenomena struck a butcher's shop and domestic flat in Torbay, Devon, driving out the butcher, a Mr Harding. He left behind his wife Mrs Jacqueline Harding, who was convinced she had seen the entity: "He was a boy aged about 12 and dressed in a sailor suit." The boy vanished into thin air as she watched. She had never seen him before and he appeared only once. ("Hubby quits home over a spook", *Sunday Mirror*, 22 May 1977).

Notably, there are several widely separated one-off cases of boy-like apparitions, in poltergeist cases e.g. Cardiff poltergeist in 1988-89 where a schoolboy like-form was seen; likewise the apparition of a boy was seen once at Hannath Hall, Cambridgeshire in 1959 and in a case in Texas in 1881.[8] In February 1978 a phantom miner materialised down a tunnel at Silverhill Colliery at Sutton-in-Ashfield Nottinghamshire, terrifying miner Kevin Hopton, 19, to the point where

'White Lady' walks the landings of Alderton Hall

EVERY Christmas actor Jack Watling and his family stand round their Christmas tree, lit with candles, and sing Christmas carols. "Then we tell ghost stories and frighten each other to death," he told me.

Not just any old ghost stories these, they are very personal ones. For the Watling's house, Alderton Hall in Alderton Hill, Loughton, is very old and has several ghosts of its own. Or so some of the family believe.

In the hall is a large fireplace, bricked up. Many years ago, a much smaller grate. The story goes that highwayman Dick Turpin broke into the house and, finding a woman there, pushed her in the fire and killed her.

Happily, for the squeamish, there seems to be no real reason to believe this one is true, and as Mr Watling says, the brickwork looks much too recent for the work to have been done as the result of such a tragedy.

The house has several other peculiarities which although they have no real story attached seem to have an awesome significance. A spy hole, for instance. It's blocked now but it used to look down from one of the upper rooms into what is now a bathroom.

Another curiosity is a door that leads nowhere. On one side of a wall is a stout wooden door, on the other it is blank—very creepy.

No good haunted house would be complete without a secret passage. Several cupboard doors line the lower part of a wall in one of the downstairs rooms. But one of them is not a cupboard and if you go through it you will come out outside the house.

The first sign of what could have been a real ghost came when Giles, now 15, was five. Pat Watling was painting in an upstairs room and Giles was with her. She heard the handle turn and the door open and Giles saying, "Mummy, it's the ghost."

She turned round but there was no one there so she turned again to her painting. Then Giles said "The story has never been explained.

Even less explicable is an incident that occurred about two years ago. Debbie, now 24, and Nicola, aged 18, were sleeping upstairs when suddenly there was an almighty crash. Books and ornaments fell on the floor beside the bed and the bed was pushed violently away from the wall.

Shortly afterwards Debbie's boyfriend, whom Jack describes as "a cynic and a scratch golfer" was sleeping in the room when he swears that he suddenly found himself three feet above the bed unable to move or call out. "He would never sleep in there again," said Jack.

Last but by no means least there is the "White Lady."

"Giles has seen her several times, and I think Debbie has seen her too," said Jack. She appears at the top of a short flight of stairs, walks down them, across the landing and through a doorway.

"I don't believe any of it," said Jack, crossing his fingers in his pocket as he finished the last story, but I wasn't convinced.

PHILIPPA VINE

● The landing at the top of the house in Alderton Hall, home of Actor Jack Watling and his family, where the

WESSEX GAZETTE & INDEPENDENT (EPPING & ONGAR) 22-12-72

GAZETTE AND INDEPENDENT, DECEMBER 22, 1972

Our house is haunted, claim couple

1725

20 JUL 1974

A YOUNG couple living in The Meadows, Nottingham, will wait for dawn tomorrow before they go to bed.

Colin Smith, 22, and his wife Pauline, 19, will sit up all night in the terrace house — because they claim it is haunted.

They say unexplained noises and ghostly figures are making it a nightmare living in the privately rented house in Glapton Road. In two and a half years they have spent only five months there.

Cross

The rest of the time they have been moving between sisters, brothers and parents. "We heard scratching noises, so we made a cross out of two pieces of wood and put it over the door," said Colin, a builder's labourer.

"But my wife took it down and a black veil followed her across the room, then flew at me."

Vases and ashtrays have crashed to the floor during the night, they say. Curtains have blown into the air and doors banged without explanation.

The couple, who have been on Nottingham Corporation's housing list for 14 months, are getting desperate.

Colin has had ten jobs in the past two years because of bad time-keeping caused by sleepless nights. And Pauline fears for their nine-month-old son.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith with their son Glenn

ABOVE LEFT: Ghosts invading people's homes was a recurring topic: here, actor Jack Watling talks to the *Wessex Gazette* about his 'White Lady'. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Some ghosts were less easy to live with, as Colin and Pauline Smith of Nottingham found in 1974. **BELOW:** Reverend Hayden Foster and his wife and baby were driven from Polstead Rectory in Suffolk after just five nights; the terrifying phenomena they experiences were linked in some accounts to the notorious Red Barn murder of 1827.

he needed hospital treatment and was unable to work for a week.[9]

In July 1978, a priest and his wife and child fled Polstead Rectory in Suffolk. The newly appointed vicar, the Revd. Hayden Foster, his wife and their baby had only arrived five days earlier before being driven out after a terrifying night during which a presence manifested.[10]

He later described the chilling night to the *East Anglian Daily Times*: "At about 3am we were lying half-awake when my wife saw the walls of the bedroom change from being freshly painted to peeling, damp old wallpaper, just as it might have looked 20 or 30 years ago," he said.

A child was heard screaming, but it was not their daughter, and Mrs Foster felt she was being suffocated or strangled. "She was trying to say the Lord's Prayer, but she just couldn't get it out because of this overwhelming force. I felt too that there was real danger in that room. There's a definite feeling of evil in that place and that's all I can put it down to."

The widow of the previous rector, Mrs Nary Neads, who had lived for 16 years at the rectory, came forward saying it was haunted; she had been troubled by phantom footsteps and minor physical phenomena, including sensations of being pushed. The case attracted extensive local and national coverage and revived stories of an infamous 19th century murder replete with psychic interest – the notorious 'Murder in the Red Barn' at Polstead in May 1827. A local unmarried

THE NEWLY APPOINTED VICAR, HIS WIFE AND THEIR BABY WERE DRIVEN OUT AFTER A TERRIFYING NIGHT WHEN A PRESENCE MANIFESTED

mother Maria Marten was cruelly slain by a treacherous lover, William Corder, who had deceitfully promised to marry her. He buried her beneath the barn floor, where she lay until her stepmother dreamed of the actual happenings, which prompted her father to go and dig up the floor. He discovered her skeletal remains wrapped in a sack and with Corder's neckerchief around the neck vertebræ. Corder was duly arrested, tried and hanged at Bury St Edmunds. His body was sent for dissection and galvanic experimentation and a book of the trial proceedings was bound with his skin (see **FT233:42-46**).[11] *Maria Marten, or the Murder in The Red Barn* became a wildly popular Victorian stage melodrama, spawning books and films over generations.

The rectory standing empty offered an opportunity for the East Anglian Psychical Research Group led by Malcolm Ramplin to hold an overnight vigil there. Participants in the group experienced nothing beyond an uncanny silence through the night and into the dawn (this was before the early morning tranquillity of Eastern counties villages came to be routinely disturbed by London commuter traffic).[12] A local man, Reg Walton of Assington, Essex, who was gathering a collection of ghost stories himself, speculated the manifestations were connected with the Red Barn Murder and that the screams might have come from one of Maria Marten's children. The following year, the Church sold the rectory, with local

ABOVE: Former landlady of the East End pub the Ancient Briton, Florrie Clark, became a 'phantasm of the living' in 1975. **LEFT:** The ghostly cyclist of Barnby was much reported on, and might have been the late Frederick Davy, according to his son.

people earnestly saying they hoped all would be swiftly forgotten.[13]

IDENTIFYING SPOOKS

In September 1978 in Sussex a QC who had been prosecuting in a Crown Court trial at Lewes fled Room 26 at the 16th century Shelleys Hotel after his bed levitated three inches (7.6cm). He spent the remainder of the night in the hallway. Other phenomena included moving ashtrays and chairs, ruffled beds and doors opening themselves. Manager Mr Nicholas believed three ghosts were at large – a benign old man who gassed himself in the 1930s, a cavalier on the staircase and an old lady in the corridor.[14] Two months later, Allan Towning, the licensee of the Swan Inn at Baythorne End, Essex, quit after enduring two years of manifestations. "All night, doors rattle and bang," he said, and the sounds terrified his two young daughters. A door mysteriously locked itself, requiring the lock to be removed altogether. Local legend attributed the haunting to an 18th century woman and serial murderer, 'Martha Blewitt' of nearby Birdbrook. She was wife to nine husbands, eight of whom she allegedly smothered with a feather pillow.

Throughout the decade it was rare for a ghost ever to be positively identified. In April 1970, Mr Alan Stevens, 25, was driving towards Lowestoft in the early hours on the A146 road from Beccles. Near Barnby, he saw a man wheeling a bicycle in the middle of the road. "He seemed to be dressed in black knee-length breeches with white stockings.

He was about 60ft (18m) in front of me and I braked hard, nearly putting my head through the windscreen, but before I stopped he had disappeared." [15] Mr Stevens said "I don't know whether I believe or disbelieve in ghosts, but I certainly saw this." He had heard of two other people undergoing similar experiences.

The following week the ghost was provisionally identified, prompting the headline:

making tea before," he said.
EASTERN EVENING NEWS 15-4-70
Ghostly cyclist of Barnby
IT WAS a curious coincidence that, on the very day on which I lamented the lack of ghosts in Lowestoft these days — but before my note appeared in print — that a new apparition should be seen in the area.
The new phantom is said to haunt the Beccles–Lowestoft road and it is slightly more up-to-date than the usual horseman. This new one takes the form of a ghostly cyclist.
A MAN
Twenty-five-year-old Mr. Alan Stevens, who is not a man of nervous disposition, reports having seen the phantom cyclist on the Beccles side of Barnby. The ghost took the form of a man, dressed in knee-length breeches with white stockings and Mr. Stevens distinctly saw the red reflector and white mudguard of the cycle which
the famous Clapham Road ghost. The street lights were to blame in this case.
On several occasions when driving through a Suffolk village I saw what I thought was a small grey van coming towards me down a slight hill, disappearing before it reached me. A phantom van? On the first occasion I certainly thought so, but it proved to be only the swinging sign of a shop.
SCEPTIC
BUT THE phantom cyclist pushing his machine is a more elaborate manifestation, complete down to the white mudguard and red reflector and it would need quite a trick of light to produce that.
If it is a ghost — and I am frankly a sceptic on the subject — then it is a comparatively modern one, if memory serves me rightly, red reflectors were only fitted to bikes in the 1930s and it was during the war that

Eastern Evening News
NORWICH 67,460
Daily Circulation 71,618
'Cycling ghost could be my father'
THE GHOST CYCLIST of Barnby may have been ident
fied. Mr. B. H. Davy, a retired local government office
of 4, Fisher Avenue, Yarmouth, believes it may ha
been his father, who was killed while cycling there
April, 1916.

"Cycling ghost could be my father'. Mr DH Davy, a retired local government officer from Yarmouth, heard the story and came forward to propose the identity of the ghost: "I am inclined to think my father was the one who was seen recently," he told the *Eastern Evening News.* He explained that his father Mr Frederick Davy, aged 54, a watchmaker and jeweller in Yarmouth, died on the road in April 1916 after being hit by a car whilst out cycling midway between Barnby Church and a spot known as Blind Man's Gate.[16]
A ghost seen twice in December 1975 at the now demolished Ancient Briton pub in London's Mile End was also identified, being Mrs Florrie Clark, a former landlady who was still alive. Landlord Jim Marling saw her wraith standing in the cellar with her arms folded. The previous tenant had also seen Mrs Clark sitting by the bar. In fact, she had not set foot in the pub for seven years. On learning this, the *Dagenham and East Barking Post* contacted Mrs Clark and took her back to the bar, where she was photographed having a drink with Jim Marling. She stated: "I was landlady for more than 14 years and was very happy. I often wish I was back," and added she was "always dreaming about the place." It is easy to see how she might otherwise have been mistaken for the ghost of a dead person.

GOOD SOLID GHOSTS

One of the joys of ghost-hunting in Britain, Tom Perrott said, was the wealth and frequency of solid hauntings. During the 1970s, if you saw or experienced a ghost, you knew it. Throughout the decade ghosts might appear as realistic human or animal forms – as a lady in a white gown, a hooded monk or a person in modern clothes assumed to be as real as an actual person… up until the moment the form vanished inexplicably or walked through a wall.

Perrott continued his research into the mid-1990s, but ceased just as the age of the Internet dawned. In the mid-1980s, he had plans to compile a computerised database of his material, but it is perhaps as well for us that he did not, since it would be likely his research would now be irretrievable from decaying floppy discs and redundant word processors.

But by the end of the 1970s there was already a sense that ghosts were changing,

EPPING EXPRESS
21/8/70

With supporting evidence of Archie the guard dog

MOONLIGHT, SCREAMS, AND TALES OF GIRLY GHOSTS

A YOUNG Debden couple heard two ghostly screams as they were walking along a moonlit path between Loughton Hall and Borders Lane, late on Sunday night.

And both are convinced that the noise came from the hall itself.

John Luscombe, 16, of Bushfields was walking home with his girlfriend Elaine, of Mannock Drive, when they heard the noise.

He said: "It happened just as we were level with the building. The first scream was very muffled and although it was a bit frightening I took no notice.

"But as we walked on we both heard a second scream and that was much louder. At first I thought it might be kids mucking about but it was too late.

"I was not imagining this. Nor was Elaine. I have walked down that path hundreds of times and never been scared or heard anything.

"What we heard was definitely like a woman's muffled screams."

Local historian Chris Johnson commented: "The last ghost sighting at the hall was before World War One. Someone claimed they had seen a woman running from the hall screaming.

There have not been any other sightings. But it is fact that the daughter of the Lord of the Manor, Jane Wroth was banished from Loughton Hall after being found guilty of living with a man out of wedlock."

A rational explanation for the screams came from Ken Jones, warden of Loughton Hall.

He said: "At about that time my guard dog "Archie"

Phantom girl stops a motorist

STRANGE THINGS are happening late at night down Poulton Road.

Another motorist has seen the elusive "phantom" who disappears as soon as people approach her.

The first "sighting" was reported three weeks ago.

Now another motorist has written to the NEWS.

He says: "I was returning, quite late, from a friend's in Higher Bebington, along Poulton Road when it occurred.

"I had just entered the darkness of the country when I saw a figure ahead at the side of the road.

"I slowed down, naturally, and saw a girl with long hair and a long dark coat apparently standing there alone. I thought this unusual at that time of night, so I stopped to see if I could be of assistance — or give her a lift.

"I leaned over to the passenger door, but as I opened it the girl slowly vanished into thin air. I was quite shaken by the incident.

"On reflection, I cannot recall having seen the girl's face, but instinctively feel she was female. I can offer no explanation for the apparition."

One explanation which has been offered is that the ghost is that of a nun who died in Poulton Hall while on her way to a nunnery. She is supposed to haunt the area.

Laying the Ghost

3-8-70
NORTHERN DESPATCH DARLINGTON

THE Darlington and Simpson Rolling Mills' ghost is disseminating his unearthly influence as far afield as America.

A post card bearing a strange device and an even weirder address arrived from the distant lands of Rockville, Maryland at the Mills on Thursday, and a bewildered managing director does not know what to make of it.

The card came from Margaret Butcher, of Chestnut Lodge, Rockville, Maryland and was posted on July 24, only two days after the ghost was spotted and reported by the Evening Despatch. That the card reached the factory at all is a credit to our much maligned Post Office for it was addressed thus:

Darlington and Simpson and Durham,
Durham by Cumberland, Westmoreland and Yorkshire
The British Isles,
The British Commonwealth
The British Empire.

This is odd enough but the legend on the reverse side baffled managing director, Mr Alistair McAllister completely, although he couched his amazement in subdued terms: "I do not appreciate the significance of the message."

The message reads: "To see a ghost on the night shift at a steel mill is to encounter conditions out of the establishment's control, and on July 22, 1970." If this is intended as a joke it is an extremely weak one to send more than 3,000 miles. Perhaps readers have an idea of the import of [illegible]

ABOVE: More stories from Tom Perrott's scrapbooks: ghostly screams in Essex and a classic road ghost from Birkenhead.

becoming less detailed and more sensationalised. In January 1979, singer Cleo Lane and composer John Dankworth spoke to *Weekend* magazine about a ghost haunting their 150-year-old Gothic style rectory. They were relaxed about the presence, with Cleo attributing it to a deceased fan! Later that year, Denise Dyke of Cannock, Staffordshire, complained of being touched by an amorous phantom admirer, leading the *Sunday Mirror* of 11 June 1979 to headline her story "Groped… by a sex mad spook!" Moreover, by the mid-1980s reliable visual sightings of ghosts were in decline. Witness accounts became fewer and less vivid and detailed. This descriptive paucity of fully-formed human apparitions was noted by Dr Peter Hallson writing in the *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research over 1985-86. Comparing cases of apparitions collected in the Victorian era with modern reports, Hallson observed that "the present-day series and supporting testimony is very much poorer in quality… Today they are often vague and sometimes silly, such as stories of black shadows, indescribable odours and attacks by evil spirits." This trend has continued, with a 2007 survey of 106 reports indicating a similar pattern.[17] And yet I wonder… Does the reduction in sightings actually represent a shift in human perceptions, a decline in such phenomena or a social change in what newspapers report and what they class as 'news'?

In stories from the 1970s we hear directly from the witnesses themselves. Many ghosts appeared very much as they did (or may have done) in life, though others were like pillars of mist or steam. But what were these people seeing? Were these returns of dead personalities or mere representations of them, like characters in dreams? Are they proof of some surviving spirit or essence, or a visual masque, display or *tableaux vivants* mounted by some inscrutable force or power?

DOES THE REDUCTION IN SIGHTINGS SHOW A SOCIAL CHANGE IN WHAT NEWSPAPERS REPORT AND WHAT THEY CLASS AS NEWS?

Whatever the case, when pondering these often vivid and vibrantly recounted ghost experiences of the 1970s, one reflects on just how many of the original witnesses, probably the great majority, have now gone to the realm of the shades themselves. Their physical presences departed, they are recollected only as names and as faces in photographs or in the collective mind's eye of dwindling pools of relatives, surviving friends and neighbours, as insubstantial as the fleeting spectres they once described. Others may be recalled no more, reduced to names inscribed on an unvisited gravestone or as an indifferent entry in official records. But though their voices are stilled, their testimony remains. Re-reading their words we hear their voices again and share in those experiences that intrigued and haunted them. And in this, they live for us again.

NOTES

1 Rodney Legge, Tom Perrott and Mary Collier, *Ghosts of Dorset, Devon and Somerset* (1974).

2 *Hertfordshire Advertiser, Psychic News*, 25 Jan 1975.

3 *East Anglian Daily Times*, 29 Oct 1975.

4 "Bumpers from phantom of the surgery", *Bristol Evening Post*, 14 Aug 1976

5 *Ealing Gazette*, 28 Sept 1975.

6 *The Sun*, 29 Sept 1976.

7 *Building Design*, Aug 1978.

8 OG Lawson & KW Porter "Texas Poltergeist, 1881", *Journal of the American Folklore Society* Vol. 64, No. 254, 371-282 (1951); A Cornell and A Gauld, *Poltergeists* (1979)

9 "Phantom of the pit puts Kevin to flight", *News of the World*, 12 Feb 1978.

10 "Three-day terror, then parson and wife quit haunted rectory", *Sunday Express*, 30 July 1978.

11 Now preserved along with his scalp at Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds.

12 *East Anglian Daily Times*, 5 Aug 1978.

13 RA Walton, *Assington News* File, self-published, West Suffolk Records Office; *East Anglian Daily Times*, 19 Aug 1978; *Bury Free Press*, 10 May 1979.

14 *Sunday Express* (Sussex), 29 Sept 1978.

15 This was before seats belts were compulsory on British roads.

16 "Ghostly cyclist haunts a road", *Lowestoft Journal*, 17 April 1970.

17 Peter Hallson, *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research. Vol 53 No. 803. pp.331-332 (1985-86); Alan Murdie, unpublished survey with material gathered by Dr Barrie Colvin (2007).

With many thanks to the late Tom Perrott, the late Doris Perrott, the Ghost Club and Claire Davy.

ALAN MURDIE is a lawyer and writer with a longstanding interest in fortean phenomena. A former president of the Ghost Club, he compiles FT's monthly Ghostwatch column.

BARKING MAD?

Argentina's chainsaw-wielding new President, Javier Milei, is a man on a mission from both God and Dog to save his nation from the evil economic policies of Satan and the current Communist Turd-Pope. **SD TUCKER** analyses the very strange mind of One Man and His (Dead) Dog.

Prior to Argentina's presidential election last November, the vote's ultimate winner, Javier Milei, put out a list rebutting 26 items of gossip being spread about him online. Many were pretty standard accusations, like "Milei will remove pensions" or "With Milei, workers will earn less". Others were more unusual, such as "[Milei will legalise] selling of children", "Milei is a NAZI", "Milei talks with dead dogs" and "Milei fucked his sister" (this is, verbatim, how it was actually phrased). Alarmingly, it would appear only some of these rumours were untrue. When a critic once described him as "a dishevelled [talk-show] panellist who screams on a stage and sleeps with eight dogs and his sister", Milei's only reply was: "I don't have eight dogs." [1] As for another 'debunked' slur – "Milei has psychological problems" – the jury is still very much out …

The standard response to Milei's election in Western media was that Milei was, indeed, a total nutter. He had to be: he offered various non-liberal policies, like abortion-scepticism, and embraced Thatcherite free-market economics. He appeared at rallies brandishing a chainsaw, promising to chop up the bloated Argentine State by closing 11 of 18 government ministries, "dynamiting" the National Bank, and 'dollarising' the economy (effectively replacing the highly devalued peso, a currency now "worth less than excrement", with the US dollar). Why such media panic? Was this just a new version of 'Trump Derangement Syndrome' among the piously progressive commentariat class, or does Mr Milei indeed suffer from genuine mental problems?

In favour of the latter option is the fact that ever since he was a shunned and bullied schoolboy, prone to sudden outbursts of violent temper against his teachers, Milei has gone by the nickname of *El Loco* – 'The Loony'. Indeed, *El Loco* is the title of the new unauthorised biography of Milei by Argentinian journalist Juan Luis González, from which many of the weirdest rumours about the new President first emerged. By González's account, it is little wonder young Javier grew up to be so combustible. His bus-driver father, Norberto, would carry a truncheon to assault chosen passengers, beatings he would also administer to his unloved son at home. On the day the Falklands War broke out, Javier foolishly guessed Argentina would lose, leading

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Javier Milei brandishes a chainsaw during a rally in La Plata, Argentina, in September 2023. His sister and campaign organiser Karina is visible at right.

MILEI APPEARED AT RALLIES BRANDISHING A CHAINSAW

Norberto to thrash him so savagely his younger sister Karina was hospitalised with shock. From her sickbed, his mother then phoned Javier to tell him that, if the girl died, it would be his fault. As an adult, Javier later broke off all contact with his parents, saying they were "dead" to him.

PEDIGREE CHUM

One very close family-member definitely not dead to Milei is his "four-legged child" Conan, an English Mastiff named after the equally well-built hero of the 1982 Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Conan the Barbarian*. This is despite the fact the canine Conan is actually deceased, having passed away from cancer of the spine in Milei's arms in 2017. And yet, discovered Milei's biographer González, Conan lives on. Being unmarried and childless, Milei considered Conan, whom he adopted as a puppy back in 2004, to be "literally [my] son" and "my true and greatest love." Although Javier is now a wealthy man, in his darkest days of cash-strapped obscurity, Conan was the only 'person' who supported him. Javier and Conan spent a dozen straight Christmases together alone in their flat, sharing a single glass of champagne each. So grateful was Milei to Conan for his backing that the lovestruck human sold his motorbike and starved on one cheap pizza per day for years so he could feed his canine friend on luxury dog-food. One day, there was a fire, in which Javier nearly died after refusing to leave home without his 'baby'.

The first the outside world knew about Conan was when his owner had a mental breakdown on a news show one day. He had found belated fame as a ranting, foul-

ABOVE LEFT: *El Loco* appears on an Argentinian television show with four of his cloned puppies. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The late Conan (Mark I), an English mastiff who for many years was Milei's best friend, "four-legged child" and "literally my son". Conan died in 2017, but continues to advise his 'father' from beyond the grave.

mouthed economic pundit, but having excoriated the "shitty leftists" destroying Argentina's wealth for a full 50 minutes, Milei suddenly fell mute when a photo of Conan popped up on-screen. Unable to take his eyes from the dog's image, Milei could not answer any more questions. "That's Conan there. It's Conan. That's Conan…" was all he was able to repeat, over and over. "How old is he?" asked the presenter, desperate to fill dead air. "Uff, I can't do the math; he's quite old," replied Milei, a disturbing confession for a qualified economist. Yet the real problem here was not innumeracy: the real problem was that Conan was dead.

Unable to accept this, Milei employed someone to operate a fake social media account in the dead dog's name, to which Milei replied with desperately needy messages like "Thank you so much LOVE OF MY LIFE, no-one's greater than you CONAN, let's hope it's not so humid anymore so we can go for a long walk." In mourning, Milei quickly contacted PerPETuate, a Massachusetts-based pet-cloning company run by the former US cattle-semen salesman Ron Gillespie, who charges $50,000 to implant genetic copies of dead dogs inside the wombs of living ones, facilitating the birth of replicas. Gillespie gave Milei "instructions for how to collect the cells and send them to us via FedEx", the precise details of which I do not want to know (fraudsters have since falsely offered Conan's supposed stored DNA for sale online for anyone to clone their own Conan too). Gillespie's procedure is quite difficult, and generally leads to only one clone-puppy being born. In Conan's case matters were different, the Mastiff's super-powerful fluids producing no fewer than six baby dogs. One died, but the other five survived, meaning Milei could organise them into an actual canine cabinet.

On the one hand, writes González, Milei believes his original pet has been resurrected as one of the new clone-dogs, also named Conan. On the other hand, his death was simultaneously merely "a physical disappearance" and the animal now sits in Heaven as the official right-hand guard-dog of a being Milei refers to as "Number One" – God Himself, to whom *El Loco* regularly speaks. "I saw the resurrection of Christ three times, but I can't talk about that because people will say I am crazy," Milei allegedly once confessed. Following an earlier stage of dog-cancer, Conan once spent eight months working with an "anarcho-capitalist witchdoctor" named Gustavo, who served as a psychic "interpreter" between dog and master. According to Gustavo, he, Milei and Conan were all once "very important people from the Roman Empire", since reincarnated to save Argentina from going the same way. Milei had been a gladiator and Conan a lion, although they never faced one another in direct combat, being told by God that, one day in the future, "they would join forces when the time was right".

MIGHTY PUPS

Gustavo boasted he had "programmed" Conan energetically so his female clone-surrogate would birth "five animals of power", each with a specific specialist area of policy expertise. Milei called these his "grandchildren" and let them live with him, transforming his flat into a poo-ridden disaster-area as they ate four of his armchairs. So chaotic did the place become that Javier banned any human visitors, explaining, "It's Kosovo." Besides Conan II, the dogs are named after Milei's favourite economists: Milton [Friedman], who advises on monetary matters, Murray [Rothbard], and Robert and Lucas, after Robert Lucas, half of whose soul must inhabit each dog. Conan is in charge of "general strategy", apparently, while another mutt has the awesome responsibility of seeing into the future and assessing the impact of any policy decisions, so mistakes can be easily avoided.

Milei also hired Celia Melamed, a "telepathist" and "interspecies communicator" who can talk not only with cats and dogs, but also spiders and mosquitos, with whom she has negotiated "a deal" never to bite her: she can also chat with dead animals, as Conan (sometimes) is, and even Covid-19 germs. Melamed trained Javier's younger sister Karina, his only childhood ally, to talk with animal-ghosts too, which proved handy when she became her brother's chief non-canine political organiser, with responsibility for campaign-planning. Formerly a humble seller of home-decorated cakes online, Karina is now set to become Argentina's First Lady, as Javier has no wife – hence the fake news story that he had "fucked" her. Actually, Javier is currently hooked up with a popular comedienne, Fátima Flórez, who used to impersonate him on TV, which is possibly even weirder. Karina reputedly controls access to her brother's court, based on Tarot readings and psychic assessments of visitors' "energies" and "constellations", and has distributed photographs of herself dressed

as a witch to selected friends.

Javier himself has also developed paranormal powers, confessing that in 2018 he was in a Buenos Aires bookshop when the ghost of the Russian-born Objectivist philosopher and libertarian free-market icon Ayn Rand suddenly appeared to him to talk policy. He also enjoys frequent dialogues with Murray Rothbard, a key intellectual founder of libertarianism, after whom one of Javier's clone-dogs is now named. Most significantly, Milei often converses with God, who told him that, just like Javier's all-time hero Moses, he had been given figurative tablets of stone bearing certain political laws, and entrusted with "a mission" to lead his people into the Promised Land of economic solvency. This, at least, is what Juan Luis González says about his bizarre biographical subject: despite his dismissive debunking-list, when given the explicit opportunity to deny all this insanity point-blank in media interviews, Milei has declined, saying that "If Conan advises me on politics, it means that he is the best consultant in the business."

"What I do… in my house is my business" he has added; an appropriate attitude for a libertarian. [2]

IS THE POPE CATHOLIC?

Much of Milei's economic outlook is based upon that of Jesus – well, Jesús Huerta de Soto, a Spanish economics professor who claims the State itself "is the manifestation of the Devil" in bureaucratic form. The current Pope Francis, also an Argentinian, may not agree – and for Milei, Pope Francis is not the true Pope at all, but a "Communist turd", "a demon on Earth", "a piece of shit", "THE ENEMY OF WELL-BEING", "an unpresentable and disastrous character", "a left-handed cultist of the hate-based model", and former *Bullseye* host Jim Bowen in a big white dress.

The problem is that Pope Francis is generally said to be a fan of both Liberation Theology (a left-wing form of Christianity critics say is merely Marxism in disguise) and that specific aspect of the native Justicialist movement of Argentina's former President Juan Perón (see **FT421:46-49, 422:48-51, 423:46-49**) which, from a Libertarian viewpoint, gave repeated welfare subsidies to workers and the poor, bankrupted the state and only spread poverty ever wider. Francis would frame such leftist ideologies as charity, but Milei calls them an "atrocity", an "aberration" and "the SHIT of social justice". Milei has actually trolled the Pope online to the effect that "Jesus didn't pay taxes". In return, the Pope has made public statements which, without specifically naming Milei, clearly urged voters to reject him. Thus, Milei now says he believes in God, but not the Church, much like Martin Luther. Formerly, Milei's official

BASICALLY, MILEI HAS A FULL-BLOWN MOSES COMPLEX

theological proclamation on such matters was thus: "I understand that within the Ten Commandments there is one that says you shall not steal. Taxes are theft. I would bring him [former profligate President Mauricio Macri] face to face with the Pope to tell me if he is in favour of stealing." Now, Milei thinks the true thief is actually the Pope. "God," he has concluded, "is a libertarian," which makes the Peronist Pope Francis a heretic.

If the Pope isn't really a Catholic, though, then is Javier Milei really a Jew? The answer is apparently "No, but he really wants to be". Like 75 per cent of his countrymen, Milei was born a Catholic, but you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise, as he repeatedly

LEFT: Milei in his superhero guise as General AnCap. **BELOW:** Milei's girlfriend Fátima Flórez impersonating *El Loco* himself on social media.

dresses as a Jew in public, including around his inauguration on 10 December, when he wore a kippah whilst meeting Israel's Foreign Minister (who didn't wear one) and handed a Jewish menorah to Ukraine's President Zelensky, another genuine Jew who was dressed more like a Gentile than the Gentile himself. "It is not by chance that this assumption [of power] takes place in the [Jewish] holiday of Hannukah," Milei said, even though it clearly was. Hannukah represents the victory of light over darkness – and now also the victory of the free-market over the Satanic socialist planned economy. Milei was drawn towards Judaism while studying the Torah for hidden economic tips, becoming intrigued by how, when in Egypt, Joseph was able to interpret Pharoah's dreams of seven skinny cows and seven fat ones as being representative of natural economic 'Kondratieff Cycles' of boom and bust. Rabbi Milei now struts onto stage preceded by the blast of a shofar, the traditional Hebrew ram's-horn trumpet, while images of mass destruction play on a video-wall, echoing the tumbling Walls of Jericho. He would like to formally convert, but considers this impossible, as if a crisis broke out on the Jewish Sabbath, when Jews are supposed to do no work, he would be religiously bound not to respond to an enemy attack. Basically, Milei has a full-blown Moses Complex. The Old Testament prophet is "my main reference, to whom I continually refer", as Milei too has been entrusted with a divine mission. [3]

DONKEYS LED BY A LION

Jews are not the only things Milei likes to cosplay as, also having his own superhero alter-ego: General AnCap, or 'General Anarcho-Capitalism', the leader of LiberLand, a place "where nobody pays any taxes". Dressed in black spandex and with a yellow cape and magic golden sceptre-staff, the General makes appearances at comic conventions, where he combats supervillains by proclaiming his desire to "kick Keynesians [followers of left-wing economist JM Keynes] and collectivists in the ass!" As a result, Milei has gained numerous young fans from Argentina's comic-book scene, who cosplay for him in their turn. Some wear rubber Milei masks themselves, forming another clone army. Others affix fake chainsaws to their forearms, as in *Evil Dead III*, or create helmets transforming them into outright chainsaw-head monsters to slash the budget deficit personally. Many also dress as lions – not only a reference to Conan's past as a gladiator-eater, but also to Milei's occasional nickname of 'The Wig', earned from his unkempt, leonine mane of hair,

which only his hardline Defence Minister is allowed to comb. "I'm not here to guide sheep, I'm here to awaken lions," he has bragged, and so he has. Proclaiming himself 'King of the Jungle', Milei, who was once in a Rolling Stones tribute-band, chose the song 'Panic Show' by local rock-group Le Renga as his campaign-anthem, due to its intensely lion-related lyrics: "'Hello everyone! I am the lion!'/The beast roared in the middle of the avenue/Everyone ran, not knowing why/Panic show in the full light of day/'Please don't run from me/I am the king of a lost world/I am the king, and I will destroy you/All accomplices are appetising to me.'" [4]

Milei is also a beast in the bedroom, being Argentina's leading tantric sex-magician, able to stave off ejaculation during intercourse for as long as three months, which makes his fellow tantric rock-star Sting seem a testicular lightweight. "I am 47 years old and I have participated in several sexual threesomes and 90 per cent of the time it was two women with me," he once announced on a chat-show. Milei also informed shocked guests that "There are three types of tantra: the white one that is very spiritual, it is a lot of connecting looks, the black one that has to do with the Earth and with the physical… and the third, red tantra, that should scare them because it's using sex as an element of domination over the other human being." A sexual as well as an economic libertarian, Milei has stated he has no objection to people having sex with elephants "as long as the elephant consents". He has no inherent objections to prostitution, homosexuality, gay marriage or transgenderism per se, but hates the proselytising "LGBT lobby" pushing such things onto others and plans to close Argentina's Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity. Despising political correctness, he often shouts the catch-phrase "Long live fucking freedom!" He also states that "In my government, there is not going to be Cultural Marxism", while reassuring voters that "I will not be apologising for having a penis." Strangely, while this arch-libertarian is allegedly open to people selling their organs or their children, he is anti-abortion and suggests a referendum on the issue. [5]

Although employing the slogan 'Make Argentina Great Again!', Javier Milei, unlike Donald Trump, has a solid educational background, with two Masters Degrees. The author of 50-plus academic papers and several books, he has taught at universities at home and abroad and been a senior economist for HSBC and a pension company. Thus, when he claims Argentina's main Faculty of Economic Sciences is a "Marxist indoctrination centre" and Peronist welfarist economics "three-legged fascism", he may know what he is talking about. Viewing Argentina as governed by a self-perpetuating, self-enriching "caste" of "donkeys", "disgusting bald men" and

SIPA US / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A supporter of Javier Milei dressed as a lion in Buenos Aires in October 2023.

corrupt frauds, when first elected to public office he began raffling his salary to the poor every month, considering its award to him to be yet more tax-theft.

Nonetheless… he clearly is a bit of a nutter, isn't he? So why did people vote him into office as their President? Precisely because he is a bit of a nutter. Once one of the richest countries on Earth – the phrase "He's as rich as an Argentinian" was a popular aphorism in the early 1900s, when the country was twice as prosperous as its former colonial master Spain – the nation's economy was completely bankrupted by decades of Peronist dictatorship and the subsequent continuation of excessive welfare policies under a democratic system. This caused hyperinflation of 140 per cent per annum, poverty for 40 per cent of citizens, and more defaults on national debt (nine) than any other country in history. Accordingly, although most mainstream, non-mad, economists give Milei's specific chainsaw-based plans to break this cycle little chance of succeeding, in the words of his biographer, Juan Luis González, many of *El Loco*'s supporters thought that "all of our previous presidents were not mad and look what good it did us – maybe we should give him a chance."

Milei was actually once under the care of a psychiatrist, but the shrink died during the Covid pandemic and Javier dumped his replacement after reading a book, *The Death of Death*, which promised the future advent of human immortality. "Do you know the difference between a genius and a madman?" Milei once asked, channelling Salvador Dalí. "Success!" [6]

In today's welfarism-ruined Argentina, a big comedy sign should now hang above the desk in the presidential office in Buenos Aires: "YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MAD TO WORK HERE – BUT IT HELPS!!!"

NOTES

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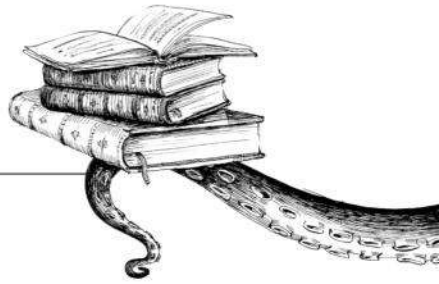


Metaphysical influences

This is a very readable and detailed historical survey of esoteric traditions in America, says **Ross MacFarlane**, but it has some surprising omissions

American Metaphysical Religion

Esoteric & Mystical Traditions of the New World

Ronnie Pontiac

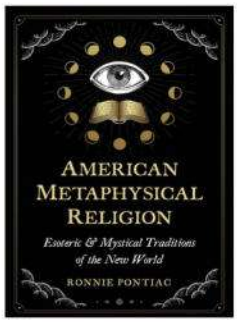
Inner Traditions 2023

Pb, 608pp, £26, ISBN 9781644115589

A positive and pragmatic attitude has long been one of the distinguishing characteristics of American esotericism. In *Lodge 49* (2018-19), the most fortean of recent American TV dramas, its main protagonist, Dud – a Californian surfer dude with a sunny disposition – finds meaning to life within the arcane brotherhood of the show's title. Dud's attitude encapsulates the "relentless optimism" that Ronnie Pontiac posits as a key theme of "American Metaphysical Religion": a term he uses to cover all manner of American esoteric and mystical thought and practice.

In his mammoth history, Pontiac's narrative takes us from the pre-colonial to the present day. A respectful chapter on the spiritual heritage of Native Americans leads into sections framed around the mixed fortunes of early colonialists, such as Thomas Morton (c.1579-1647) and John Winthrop Jr (1606-1676). Morton – the "Pagan Pilgrim" – fell afoul of fellow settlers by establishing close relations with the indigenous population and holding revels around a maypole at the colony he founded. Winthrop – collector of books from John Dee's library – was more successful in spreading both Rosicrucianism and older traditions of alchemy in the "New World".

Pontiac regularly notes how the existence of separate rural communities which nurtured minority views allowed for the development of esoteric beliefs. He explores at length the life of Frances Wright (1795-1852), an early feminist, free thinker and abolitionist, who founded the utopian Nashoba Commune in 1825, in an ill-fated attempt to cure slavery; as well as the proto-eugenic Oneida communities, founded by Joseph Noyes – "the first American to put free in front of love". Spiritualism also weaves in and out of the narrative. Rather than being a mid-19th century entity, however, Pontiac sees the growth of mediums contacting the spirit world as comparable to "indigenous tribes … communicating with their ancestors through dreams", traditions of ancestor worship amongst enslaved people, and mediumship practised by early Quaker settlers.



The most detailed section covers Thomas Moore Johnson (1851-1919) and Alexander Wilder (1823-1909), two men of letters whose correspondence shows the growth and complex entanglements of esoteric organisations in the US in the late 19th century. Wilder combined his successful herbalist practice with a deep involvement with the emerging Theosophical Society, even editing its leader Madame Blavatsky's magnum opus, *Isis Unveiled*. Johnson, also a Theosophist, developed his intellectual interests editing *The Platonist*, a newspaper which had grown from the sizeable – and surprising – interest in Plato's philosophy on the frontier of the Wild West, and through involvement with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor – a secretive magical order, influenced by the fascinating Paschal Beverly Randolph: trance medium, founder of the first known Rosicrucian order in America and sex magician.

Oneida founder Joseph Noyes – 'the first American to put free in front of love'

As such free thinkers and secretive orders became established, Pontiac notes how they influenced wider American culture. One of his most compelling examples is William Guthrie (1868-1944), the Rector of St Mark's Episcopalian Church in New York, who held "Indian Days" with special services drawing on Indigenous songs and traditions, and invited artists such as the dancer Isadora Duncan and the then little-known Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran to perform at the church.

As Pontiac's narrative moves into the 20th century, the antecedents of New Age thought start to emerge. He relates the renaissance of interest in Tarot cards, astrology and reincarnation, as the geographic pull of the book leans more to California and Hollywood. For a work that is optimistic in character, Pontiac also highlights American adherents of Nazi Germany's mystical fascism, following a trail from the 1930s onwards into a myriad of splinter groups.

To bring his narrative to a close, Pontiac diligently shows how esoteric beliefs have not only shaped American society, but have themselves been shaped in turn. Societal changes such as second wave feminism, the rise of LGBTQ+ identities, as well as urban redevelopment have all played a role; he also provides a personal testimony on the rise and fall of the Bodhi Tree Bookstore in Los Angeles, which closed due to local gentrification.

Pontiac sees his book as an entry level guide, synthesising recent academic research. He certainly succeeds in this endeavour. Not only is his book splendidly readable for a long volume, it's also a work in which even those with a detailed interest in esotericism will find fresh insights. Given this, therefore, it seems churlish to make criticisms, but – even after 600 pages – I'm still not sure if "American Metaphysical Religion" *actually* exists as a distinctive tradition: even Pontiac flip-flops on this question in his introduction. There are also some notable absences. You don't have to be fully accepting of an esoteric interpretation to see the relevance of UFO cults and beliefs, while the Human Potential Movement and the Esalen Institute – so emblematic of the commercialisation of New Age health and "wellness" practices – only make the briefest of cameos. Indeed, this underlying theme of profit-making is not as well represented in the narrative as some might expect. Alongside *Lodge 49*'s Dud and his relentless optimism, we might also think a less obvious but more cynical TV avatar for American esotericism might be Don Draper of *Mad Men* (2007-15), for whom enlightenment dawns in an Esalen-esque retreat, as he meditates on ways to make more money from all the believers out there…

★★★★

The Wicker Man at 50

Jay Vickers enjoys two very different books on the ultimate folk horror film

The Wicker Man

The Official Story of the Film

John Walsh

Titan Books 2023

Hb, 192pp, £39.99, ISBN 9781803365084

The Sing-Along-a-Wicker-Man Scrapbook

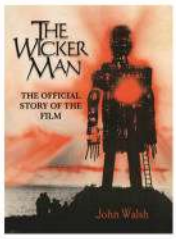
In Search of the Pagan Heart of Britain

David Bramwell

Nightfinch Books 2023

Pb, 92pp, £10, www.drbramwell.com

It is, astonishingly, 50 years since *The Wicker Man* first graced the cinema screens – though few of us actually saw



it then, for reasons that are now well-known. Here are two vastly different books on the phenomenon that is not just the film itself, but the culture that has grown around it.

Filmmaker John Walsh's *Official Story of the Film* is a large-format book (13x10in, 33x26cm) full of glossy photos – stills from the film, location shots, actors, posters and more. Walsh has gathered together a host of perceptive interviews with and articles on, amongst others, David Pinner who wrote the novel *Ritual*, on which *The Wicker Man* is (loosely) based; Christopher Lee ("*The Wicker Man* was the best-scripted film I ever took part in, and it turned out to be a flawed masterpiece"); and a rare interview with Britt Ekland in which she says she didn't get on with either director Robin Hardy or producer Peter Snell, and gives her thoughts on having her voice dubbed, and on her bum-double – but that 50 years on she's more positive about the film than in the past.

Perhaps most fascinating are a long interview with Seamus Flannery, who was responsible for the design of the whole film including the wicker man itself – and the problems that came from filming a story set around May Day in October and November; and a detailed piece on Paul Giovanni and his creation of the amazing music for the film.

In contrast, David Bramwell's *Sing-Along-a-Wicker-Man Scrapbook* is a slim paperback documenting a personal labour of love by a fan. In 2008 Bramwell and his friend Eliza came up with the idea of putting on Sing-Along-a-Wicker-Man – "fun, bawdy, DIY" – initially in Bom-Bane's restaurant in Brighton. In more than a decade since, they have put on their show across Britain, in cinemas and theatres and back rooms of pubs, at festivals and at student parties, with the audience enthusiastically joining in with "Willow's Song", "The Landlord's Daughter", "Gently Johnny" and the other songs, right through to the cheerful singing of "Summer is Icumen In" as Sgt Howie is consigned to the flames.

"We meet pagans, Wiccans, druids, hippies, occultists, witches, chaos magicians and a fair few folk in crushed velvet," Bramwell writes. They receive two very different reviews in the *Guardian*. one saying the show "hits all the wrong notes", the second that it is "frankly genius"; they use them both on their posters.

As the sing-alongs continue, Bramwell comes to question the morality of the finale: as he and the audience are singing along joyfully with the islanders of Summerisle, are they becoming "accomplices to murder"? It's a good question.

A thoughtful and delightfully fun book.

Walsh ★★★★

Bramwell ★★★★★

Invisibility

The History and Science of How Not to Be Seen

Gregory Gbur

Yale University Press 2023

Hb, 288pp, £25, ISBN 9780300250428

American physicist Gregory Gbur begins his tale of scientific discovery on a winningly dark note. There was once a shepherd called Gyges who, upon discovering a ring that made him invisible, killed the king and stole the kingdom and generally ran rampant over everyone and everything.

The story is Plato's, his nightmarish point being: what if we were virtuous only because we fear punishment? (In Paul Verhoven's 2000 movie *Hollow Man*, Sebastian Caine [Kevin Bacon] finds "it's amazing what you can do … when you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror any more".)

Invisibility lets the id off its leash; the horrors that follow are on us. HG Wells's antihero Griffin is driven mad as much by his nakedness as by his invisibility; because his clothes remain visible, "The Invisible Man" must stalk the world naked, like any other beast of prey.

Gbur studs his scientific account with 250 years of mostly minatory fiction, from Jack London's dizzying "The Shadow and the Flash" to AE van Vogt's space epic *Slan*. You would think, wouldn't you, that all this might finally convince us that There Are Things We Were Not Supposed to Know?

Why would we pursue this dangerous gift? Gbur's answer: because invisibility – even partial invisibility – can be a protection.

This is essentially a scientific account of the pursuit of invisibility – or rather more precisely (since invisibility can be achieved easily by, say, hiding behind the sofa) the pursuit of techniques to manipulate lightwaves.

Structures smaller than wavelengths of visible light can manipulate these waves more flexibly and more accurately than any lens. The days of the Harry Potter invisibility cloak are not yet upon us, but may not be more than a generation off.

Some of the most exciting current work, however, doesn't involve light at all. Rather, it scales up recent optical discoveries to handle other kinds of waves, making sea platforms invisible to freak ocean surges, and buildings invisible to seismic shock.

Gbur shows how optical science and ideas about the atom intertwined over two centuries, beginning with Thomas Young's experimental demonstration of light's wave-like properties around 1801. It's a bravura performance, that helps us to see how those coloured interference haloes that appear when two bits of glass are put one on top of the other relate directly to the quantum theories of Niels Bohr.

Gbur is no mean literary archæologist either, showing how contemporary ideas about light – and particularly the discovery of non-visible ends to the electro-magnetic spectrum – shaped the evolving fiction of invisibility. I defy you not to spend your next paycheck hunting down the wilder items in Gbur's "Invisibibliography".

Simon Ings

★★★★★

Cry of the Wild

Eight Animals Under Siege

Charles Foster

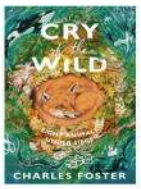
Doubleday 2023

Hb, 256pp, £16.99, ISBN 9780857529381

I approached this book with two concerns, that it might be too anthropomorphic and that each story would be a lesson on natural history with just enough narrative to sweeten the pill. I was, thankfully, wrong on both counts. Foster says in his introduction that a certain level of anthropomorphism is necessary to enable the reader, being human, to engage with the lives of the animals at some level. And while I finished the book knowing considerably more about the eight animals featured, Foster weaves together natural history and good storytelling so well that it didn't feel like a biology lesson.

There are eight stories and eight animals, all occupying different ecological niches. What unites them is that all face existential threats. Starting with the story of an urban fox, we meet an orca, a human, a mayfly, a rabbit, a gannet, an otter and an eel.

Layered between competition for mates, establishing a territory, raising young and finding food are additional challenges brought about by the environmental degradation facing all creatures on planet Earth in the 21st century. The orca's pod fragments as ingestion of plastics and chemicals affect fertility. The fox leaves London heading east, where he has to draw on some kind of race memory to survive away from the dustbins and fast food wrappers that sustained him as a cub. The rabbit fights not only others of her species but property developers in a search for a warren that is no Watership Down.



While the hunters cast disturbing shadows in the stories of the rabbit and the fox, the majority of the human characters in *Cry of the Wild* choose to engage with nature and are benign, even if their behaviour seems strange.

What is truly strange, though, is our relationship with nature, if we have one at all. We humans confine nature to reserves, congratulating ourselves on keeping it safe in a tiny corner of its former range. We pollute the food chain, so even we are daily ingesting toxic chemicals and microplastics. The manufactured hormones we excrete into rivers and seas put whole species at risk.

Foster is, however, optimistic about the future if we are able to rebuild our connection with the natural world.

Does this book preach? Maybe, but these are words we need to hear. If you enjoy reading about nature, you will like this book. If you rarely think about nature, you must read this book.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★★

For the Love of Mars

A Human History of the Red Planet

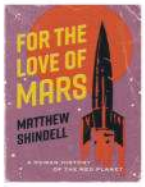
Matthew Shindell

University of Chicago Press 2023

Hb, 248pp, £20, ISBN 9780226821894

Peter Matthew Shindell is a curator at the US National Air and Space Museum, and his aim in this book, as he explains in the introduction, is to survey the changing ways in which Mars has featured in human culture over the centuries. But the rather surprising message I came away with, and maybe not the one that Shindell set out to convey, was just how little interest people took in Mars prior to the 20th century. If humanity can be said to have any kind of "obsession" with the Red Planet, it's something that's really only picked up in the age of space travel.

At the other extreme, the first chapter, dealing with astrological beliefs in ancient Mesoamerica, China and the Middle East, hardly mentions Mars at all. It seems to have been viewed simply as a kind of "LED of the Gods", which, depending on how dim or bright it was, indicated how well or badly things were going to go on Earth. Shindell doesn't deign to talk about Ancient Alien theories, but if he had, this view seems to negate any notion that the ancients understood other planets to be worlds like our own.



The first glimmering of this only emerges in the 12th century, when a French philosopher named Silvestris described a fictional journey into space. His version of Mars features "seething and sulphurous waters", which may be the earliest description of the topography of another planet in history. By the 17th century, after the first telescopes had shown that Mars really is a world of its own, Athanasius Kircher gave a more vivid description of the Martian landscape as "rocky, jagged, mountainous and covered in fireball-spewing volcanoes".

Such speculations remained few and far between until the end of the 19th century, when fiction like HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and astronomer Percival Lowell's erroneous observations of canal networks on Mars, began to persuade the public that it might actually be inhabited by intelligent beings. This led to a golden age of Martian fiction, which only came to an end with the first robotic voyagers to the Red Planet in the 1960s and 70s.

Ironically, for a book that's supposed to be about history, it's only in the last couple of chapters, dealing with events that are well within living memory, that the focus really shifts squarely onto Mars, rather than the more general cultural background in which Mars plays a relatively minor role.

Andrew May

★★★

Fact, Fictions, and the Forbidden Predictions of the Amazing Criswell

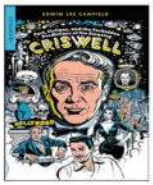
Edwin Lee Canfield

Headpress 2023

Pb, 396pp, £22.99, ISBN 9781915316004

Criswell was an early celebrity psychic with a fabulous catchphrase: "We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives." Best remembered for opening *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, Criswell was a television host, vitamin peddler, syndicated newspaper columnist and frequent talk show curiosity.

Born Jeron Charles Criswell King in King Station, Indiana, his early career was spent attempting to make it on Broadway while publishing self-help books along with his wife, Myrtle. By 1940 the pair were in Los Angeles, with Myrtle remaking herself as the actress Halo Meadows, and Criswell reborn with psychic abilities.



There's a fake-it-till-you-make-it quality to many performers, and Criswell faked extravagantly. His predictions were infamously incorrect, but that never stopped him from making another talk show appearance while claiming 87 per cent of everything he said came true. He often sounded the alarm that the world would end on 18 August 1999 – but rightly predicted Ronald Reagan would be Governor of California.

Edwin Lee Canfield's book is more a scrapbook of photos, interview excerpts, newspaper clippings and talk show transcripts than an actual biography. One wishes for a deeper exploration of Criswell's self-creation and self-promotion. Instead, we get years of Canfield's Internet research and interviews slapped together more or less chronologically. Criswell completists will take heart in the information gathered, and in some ways the pulpy presentation fits its subject.

Criswell's shtick concerned the world of tomorrow, and indeed he presaged a certain type of B-list fame that has only grown in the intervening years.

Mike Pursley

★★

Sigillagraphia

Illustrated History of Magic Symbols

MB Jackson

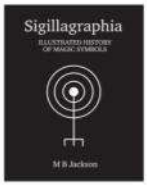
Green Magic 2023

Pb, 121pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781915580047

Angelic, demonic, alchemical: magical signs and symbols have an undeniable fascination. Mark Jackson has made a cottage industry out of this recently with several books, notably *Sigils* (2021), a charming and compact little volume that communicated the enchantment despite a slapdash text – I had a strange sense of déjà vu on finding my own book on Austin Spare plagiarised – and some bizarre errors, eg that Aliester [sic] Crowley initiated Spare into the "Arum Argentius", which should be the Argenteum Astrum.

This latest book covers the last 70,000 years, becoming a whistlestop history of occultism. The catch-all spread – from Christ on the cross to "Have a nice day" as a chaos-magic sigil – loses some of the magic, and the chronological arrangement can be irritating, categorising the Buddhist dharma wheel and lotus as "modern" and the "om mane padme hum" mantra as "postmodern".

Like the content the format has over-expanded, with a thin paperback of nearly A4 making the unfortunate print-on-demand quality more obvious. Jackson is intelligent and you can feel a better book struggling to get out. Meanwhile someone should bring out a new edition of the *Dictionary of Occult, Hermetic and Alchemical Sigils*, the scholarly classic from the late, tragic Fred Gettings.



Phil Baker

★★★

The origins of the fairies

A new study, while scholarly and meticulously researched, may actually be asking the wrong questions

Twilight of the Godlings

The Shadowy Beginnings of Britain's Supernatural Beings

Francis Young

Cambridge University Press 2023

Hb, 365pp, £30, ISBN 9781009330367

"Didn't the Faun tell you I was coming?" asks the centurion in *Puck of Pook's Hill*.

Two centuries earlier, John Aubrey, like Rudyard Kipling, had identified Robin Goodfellow as a faun; and long before that, cultists in fourth-century Thetford gathered to honour Faunus, spirit of the wood and wild.

So maybe Puck, the oldest Old Thing in England, really does have a genealogy stretching back to Roman times.

Francis Young thinks so. A meticulous researcher, he knows that claims for folklore's *longue durée* were often made on little or no evidence, but feels we could usefully return to the old question of British fairy origins.

Put simply, Shakespeare expected instant comprehension when he put a supernatural race on stage with their king and queen.

Some are beautiful and some ugly, some monstrous and some small; they steal children, they take lovers; they have powers over fate and destiny.

How had it become so easy for his contemporaries to believe in this parallel magical race?

Though "fairy" is itself a 14th-century word, it replaced other terms for the minor deities of nature and fate that Young conveniently calls godlings.

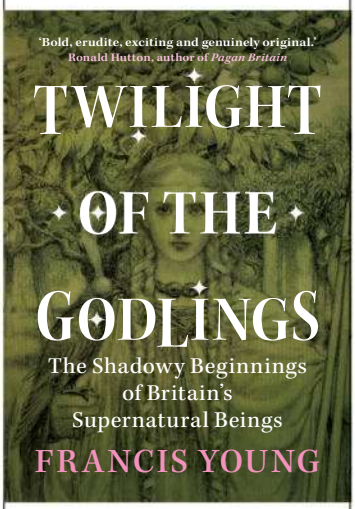
He lines up four suspects for the origin of this mythology.

There is the Roman, with his fauns, nymphs, fates and *genii*; the Germanic settler with his charm-lore of elves, dwarfs and pucks; the mediæval churchman, learned in the ways of *incubi* and *sylvani*; and finally the mediæval romancer with his tales of Faerie.

He, at least, can be easily dismissed: mediæval people knew that fiction was fiction, and a folkloresque character like Morgan le Fay need not tell us any more about real fairies than Dumbledore does about real magicians.

A fluent Latinist, Young traces the unwitting creativity through which mediæval clerics matched texts from Jerome and Augustine with terms inherited from the vernacular to form new imaginative worlds.

There are no Celts among his suspects: of course the New Age Celtic industry has discredited this line of thought, but still, there is no denying that Irish storytellers had legends of a parallel race, and folktales of abduction, several centuries before anyone else; and in Ireland, unlike Britain and the Continent, written romance was continuous with actual belief.



To support his views on origins, Young tackles some of the trickiest issues of folkloristics: survival, borrowing, fusion and invention.

His chapter on religion and belief in post-Roman Britain is one of the best treatments available for this challenging period.

It doesn't, in the end, tell us much about godlings; but these are five centuries in which we know next to nothing about anything, so extracting a lucid history is a triumph in itself.

This is the consequence of a book that gives equal weight to all periods from AD 50 to 1500: the narrative gathers pace in the last two chapters, on the early and late Middle Ages, because here is the direct evidence for what people said and thought.

Be prepared for long passages where Young name-checks more scholars in fairy studies than fairies themselves, a sort of glass bead game in which secondary sources are poised, weighed and arranged, perhaps at the expense of the original beliefs and experiences.

To ask about fairy beginnings is to reject the possibility that they were always there: as if there was once a time when people did not encounter the supernatural, and then someone – which of the suspects? – went and made it all up.

Twilight of the Godlings has already achieved a deserved celebrity: people cite it as the go-to book for anyone who wants to know where fairies come from.

But the fairies of *King Orfeo* are not those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and they are not those of *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.

Traditional performances do not offer us snapshots of a godling population at different stages of development; each age has its own Faerie, a new nexus of beliefs in the network of supernatural imagination.

Folklore has no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end, even if we can trace a history for the themes that crisscross it over time – gold that turns to leaves, wizened faces in cradles, centuries that pass in a night.

This book brings impressive contemporary scholarship to bear on a topic that preoccupied yesterday's folklorists. But it may be looking for the answer to a question that does not exist.

Jeremy Harte

★★★

Purgatory

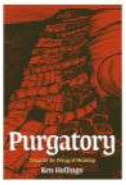
The Trash Project: Towards the Decay of Meaning

Ken Hollings

Strange Attractor Press 2023

Pb, 344pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781913689230

Following on from 2020's *Inferno* – an excursion into the wondrous world of 1960s American Trash culture inhabited by a heterogeneous cast of radical filmmakers and players – *Purgatory* redirects Ken Hollings's forensic gaze towards Paris and the European art scene of the 19th and 20th centuries in its search for meaning and authenticity.



Hollings refers to his text, written during the lockdown, as a "diary of the plague year", in which fugal narratives seek to circumscribe the plight of meaning as it absconds from our collective cultural dictionary. Presented as a sequence of short essays and modelled on the topography of Dante's purgatory, his engagement with trash as cultural fundament is virtuosic in its scope. As we emerge from the dissection of beauty throughout the *Antepurgatory* and undergo a normalisation of trash on the *Terraces*, by the time we reach the *Earthly Paradise* we discover in trash the true *prima materia* that underpins Western culture. The alchemical metaphors in which Hollings delights, take the reader through the vagaries of transformation and transmutation, the derogation of nature and our perennial delight in simulation.

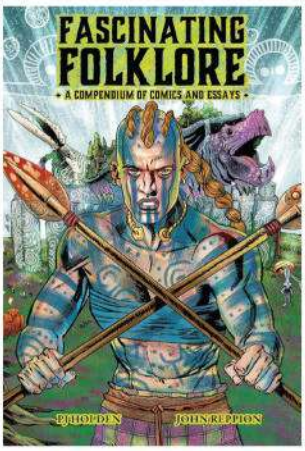
Along the way we also encounter a world-weary Tony Hancock lording it over the Parisian existentialist scene in *The Rebel*; decadence and degeneracy as radical opportunism in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*; the primacy of sensation and surface in J-K Huysman's *À Rebours*; and the primal vocabulary of the horror/erotica cinema of the 1960s and 70s – not to mention the complex of diaristic, classical and art historical excursions latticed throughout. Hollings's celebration of trash æsthetics suggests itself as the Philosopher's Stone able to render alchemy, voyeurism, beauty, death, decay and humour under one banner: an excursion never less than compelling in its sheer erudition. A fascinating read.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Fascinating Folklore: A Compendium of Comics and Essays

John Reppion, PJ Holden

Liminal 11 2023

PB, 148pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781912634729

There's a real pleasure in being present at the start of an idea and then seeing it grow to fruition. #folklorethursday was a highlight for those of us who like some folk wisdom, folk horror or urban legends to get through the working week. I still remember the first comics that form the core of this book appearing on the hashtag. The idea was simple. John Reppion wrote a tweet about a particular aspect of folklore, and PJ Holden illustrated it. Both were working within the restrictions of the medium, but both used those restrictions to produce beautiful art.

Subject-wise, John and PJ cover a wide range of subjects from festivals such as Saturnalia and Hallowe'en, to strange objects, plantlore, cryptids, and legendary figures. PJ excels at finding the right style for each subject, some incredibly detailed, others featuring a single object; sometimes satirical, sometimes hard hitting, but all beautifully drawn.The accompanying essays add detail to the topics, turning what would have been a lovely collection of comics into something with depth that provides a great starting point for a vast range of folkloric topics. From the stunning illustration of Boudicca on the cover, through discussions of playground food folklore, to sea monster Zaratan lurking on the back cover, *Fascinating Folklore* is a joy from beginning to end.

Bea Wolf

Zach Weinersmith, Boulet

First Second, 2003

Pb, 208pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781250776297

I find out about comics for this column in various ways. Sometimes I find them online, occasionally I ask for people to send me their work, and once a year I stumble around Thought Bubble looking for cool comics to share with you. This particular book was recommended to me by two early mediæval specialists, and I'm so glad they sent it my way.

Bea Wulf is set in a world of young children where after a succession of child kings, King Roger builds Treeheart, a treehouse plagued by the neighbour Grindle whose very touch turns children to feckless teenagers or joyless adults. From across the water comes Bea Wolf, honouring an ancient pledge to support Roger's royal line.

Zach Weinersmith's writing uses the original rhythms of *Beowulf*, but not slavishly, having great fun with alliteration and Anglo-Saxon style kennings, while also firmly placing the story in the world of children. Boulet's artwork captures the sheer joy of childhood, with "teeth frosting crusted", and "vast volumed video games of no educational value whatsoever!"

This is an enthusiastic, ebullient comic that will not only introduce younger readers to one of the classics of literature but has a huge amount of value as a retelling on its own merit. Buy it for your children and read it yourself to stay away from the touch of Grindle for a few sweet-filled hours.

Establishing Shot / Second Chances

Will O'Mullane and others

https://arachnidguy.gumroad.com/

Pb, 40pp, £6 / £4

Establishing Shot is a 40-page anthology comic from Will O'Mullane and a cast of collaborators. The comics are short and punchy, playing with conventions of style, storytelling, and the comic format itself. It's a two-sided book, with the first half in colour and the second black and white. In these stories characters break out of frame, break the fourth wall, and break each other. What's impressive is Will's ability to tell a compact story in such a short space. If you're a fan of *2000AD*'s 'Future Shocks' you'll find a lot to enjoy here.
The art styles vary from noir crime to superhero, each one capturing the mood perfectly. My favourite was 'Bulwark Beatdown', the traditional style juxtaposed with a very simple but well thought out story that understands superhero comics perfectly.

Second Chances continues in the same vein with three more stories playing with convention, style and storytelling and makes an excellent companion piece; it also contains 'Inheriterror', probably my favourite story from both collections. Will is selling *Establishing Shot* and *Second Chances* for £6 and £4 respectively, which is a bargain.

Shelter: Early Doors

Lucy Sullivan

https://lucysullivanuk.com/buy-comics/early-doors

Pb, 36pp, £6

With *Shelter: Early Doors* Lucy Sullivan has written an extremely unnerving horror comic grounded in the realities of life and set in the London Irish community at the end of the Sixties, which are anything but Swinging. In the same way Joan Didion turned her attention away from the hype of Haight Ashbury to capture the sleaze of the Frisco scene at the time, Sullivan looks away from the glamour of Carnaby Street to portray a deeply unsettling world of family and social pressures and exploitation.

At its heart, this is a story of transmission; the transmission of trauma through brutality, the transmission of obligations, and the transmission of folklore. Lucy describes it as folk horror, and it is, but a very specific type of the genre. Here, the folklore is carried from the rural into the urban and the horror is really other people and the ties we have to them. It's also a story of hidden communities and their stories, ignored by wider society at the time.

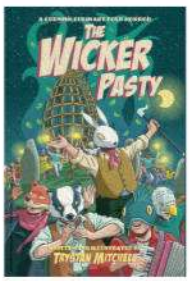
Lucy's artwork captures the messy, scratchy, character both of the late Sixties London setting and of the darkness that lies at the heart of the story. There is powerful low magic to be found here under the mouldy wallpaper and in hand-dug holes on waste-ground. Highly recommended.

The Wicker Pasty

Trystan Mitchell

https://www.thebigfootstudio.com/shop-comics.html

Digital, £6



In the Cornish village of Pendhu, it will soon be the festival of Gool Hoggan. Folklore podcaster Jack Cousens has travelled down to the Southwest to meet his friend Sam Whitford. Pendhu is rich in food folklore, perfect for Jack's podcast, and he spends his time sampling the local cuisine while asking about Sam, who is nowhere to be found. Behind his back, the locals make phone calls to the mysterious Magister and masked figures roam the streets at night...

The Wicker Pasty is not a parody, but a well told tale that uses the cultural touchstones of folk horror and cosmic horror to tell a brand new story. Though there is a serious point at the heart of the comic about the scouring of local traditions for wider commercial profit, the references throughout will bring a smile to the face of those familiar with their horror genres. Yet the storytelling doesn't rely on any prior knowledge, with the fun only enhanced by the bright, colourful artwork. There are ancient rituals, Neolithic monuments and strange sea creatures aplenty. Perfect for any fortean, especially those wanting to familiarise themselves with ancient Cornish traditions before the next Gool Hoggan festival.

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Monster movie masterpiece

The King of the Monsters is back to celebrate his 70th birthday in a new film that harks back to the nuclear nightmare of the 1954 original

Godzilla Minus One

Dir Takashi Yamazaki, Japan 2023
Available now on streaming platforms

In 1954 writer Shigeru Kayama and director Ishiro Honda unleashed the greatest movie monster of all time upon Japan and then the world. In a country still raw from nuclear devastation, the atom bomb was given flesh in the form of *Godzilla*, a giant dinosaur mutated by radioactive fallout. Producer Tomoyuki Tanaka said of the monster: "Godzilla is the son of the atomic bomb. He is a nightmare created out of the darkness of the human soul. He is the sacred beast of the apocalypse." The film was a dark, nightmarish story, firmly in the horror camp rather than science fiction. It stands up today, 70 years later.

As the franchise evolved, the films became increasingly light-hearted, with Godzilla becoming the protector of Earth and fighting off hostile aliens, monsters and robots like a big, scaly superhero. The films were great fun and wildly entertaining, but a million miles from the raw post-war horror of the original. Godzilla has since been portrayed as a destructive monster, a neutral force of nature to whom humans are an irrelevance (much like Lovecraft's Outer Gods) and a benign saviour of mankind.

Godzilla's star is ascendant at the moment, with a popular American reboot that's a sort of big-budget version of the family-friendly Japanese films, a spin-off series on Apple TV and a comic book where he beats the tar out of Superman and the Justice League. But director Takashi Yamazaki has taken the radioactive reptile back to his roots in *Godzilla Minus One*.

The film is clearly a homage to Honda's 1954 classic, despite being very much its own beast. In most Godzilla films the human element is, frankly, pretty dull, and you want the movie to get back as quickly as possible to an atomic dinosaur beating the crap out of a giant gorilla. *Godzilla Minus One* turns this on its head. Indeed, it would work almost as well without the big lizard as a bleak film about the aftermath of war and its effect on the human psyche – the 'Minus One' of the film's title refers to where Japan finds itself at this point in history

Unstoppable, he annihilates hope along with people and buildings

– but when the 'big G' does put in an appearance, boy, does he put it in.

Koichi Shikishima (Ryunosuke Kamiki) is a Kamikaze pilot at the end of WWII. Realising the allies are going to win and not wishing to die for nothing, he fakes a problem with his plane ad lands on Odo Island. The mechanics on the island find nothing wrong with the aircraft, but then a dragon-like monster emerges from the sea and attacks. Ordinary firearms do it no damage and chief mechanic Tachibana (Munetaka Aoki) begs Shikishima to use the heavy duty machine guns on his plane to attack the creature. Shikishima freezes with fear and the monster kills everybody on the island save for him and Tachibana. Wracked with guilt at his cowardice, Shikishima returns to Japan. He finds his house wrecked and his parents dead. Eking out a living in what is left of his family home, Shikishima takes in the homeless Noriko (Minami Hamabe) and unbearably cute orphan toddler Akiko. They scrape by until Shikishima gets a job on a minesweeper captained by former naval engineer Kenji Noda (Hidetaka Yoshioka). Using machine guns, they destroy sea mines left behind by the allied forces. Noriko too gets a job, and together they repair the house.

Enter Godzilla, who emerges as the crew are at work – they escape only due to him turning his wrath on a naval warship. But soon after, the monster makes landfall and tears into Tokyo with the most brutal attack in his 70-year history. Tanks are mere toys to him, and he leaves thousands dead in the wake of his teeth, tail and devastating atomic breath. Wild and unstoppable, he annihilates hope along with people and buildings. With the government helpless and ineffectual, it falls to the people to take on the monster. Kenji Noda comes up with a daring plan to stop Godzilla, and Shikishima may have to return to the role of a Kamikaze one more time.

This is a film about hope, despair, the human spirit and the fact that it's the little people that suffer most in a war. Godzilla is clearly a metaphor for nuclear war, but he is also the archetypal giant predator, the primal fear our ancestors dealt with and that still haunts our civilised nightmares even today.

Godzilla Minus One is the biggest grossing Japanese language film ever and a fitting 70th birthday present for cinema's greatest monster; Takashi Yamazaki is already planning the sequel. A masterpiece of storytelling and movie making – see it!

Richard Freeman

★★★★★

TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

There's been a welcome foray into cryptozoology by wildlife camera-people in recent years: I'd recommend Justin Chernipeski's *Expedition Sasquatch* (Prime) as a great example of a professional film-maker treating the search as a standard assignment, combining the almost Zen-levels of patience required to nab the perfect shot with a refreshing lack of hoo-hah. From this milieu emerges Paul Mungeam, adventurer and cameraman, with *Expedition Mungo* (Quest). Against a deserty backdrop he addresses the viewer: "My name's Mungo," he says, "and I've been a cameraman for over 20 years." He has a camera on his shoulder to reinforce this credential. It turns out that he's heard some incredible things, so he's going to set out with his camera – the one on his shoulder presumably – to get them on film. Cue action shots of Land Rovers, mud, jungle, rivers, pack horses etc. To his credit he's looking for the lower profile, second division cryptids, particularly those with alliterative names – the Living Dinosaur of Liberia, India's Monkey Man Monster – or things like the Dog-Headed Pig Monster of Namibia (maybe that was the Pig-Headed Dog Monster. I don't know.) In Episode four he's after the Ucumar, or South American Sasquatch.

To his credit, he's looking for lower profile, second division cryptids

Walking among a milling throng in the Andean foothill town of Salta, his camera still on his shoulder, Mungo explains he's there to find the truth. Local reports speak of a hunter who encountered a giant hairy man while fishing, so they have a natter. They quickly establish that it wasn't a bear (apart from anything else, we know South American bears are three feet tall and wear hats and duffle coats) and the hunter believes it was a Bigfoot. Local biologist Professor Baravel speculates that it may actually be a much bigger brown bear, long thought extinct in the region, as it's still more likely than an unknown ape. Undaunted, having heard from a local cattle herder about losing livestock to a particularly aggressive Ucumar, Mungo sets off into the scrub, and then further into the wilderness to meet with indigenous Cosha people, who agree to help him: as usual, these are the best people to speak to and are fully aware of the Ucumar's existence. They dismiss the bear idea outright and agree to help find the best spot to snap the beast.

Camera back on his shoulder, Mungo, his squad (none of whom are called Mary or Midge, disappointingly) and a local guide traipse into the undergrowth, strap umpteen camera traps to trees and hunker down to await developments: sure enough there's soon a noise to startle them – no such programme is complete without a "what was that?" moment – but the trailcam reveals it to be a curious tapir. You can't fault Mungo's methodology, and he does bring some obscure cases to the fore. And if nothing else, it's lovely to look at.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

In 2017, The University of California studied 100 of the most successful movies from the previous three years. Their gender analysis revealed that women had only 36% of screen time, dropping to a mere 32% for Oscar-winning films. If you only counted speaking parts, it was a paltry 27%. One genre bucked the trend, however, with female characters speaking and driving the plot for 53% of the running time. Yes, horror movies are often dismissed as misogynistic, yet ironically they're the most consistent at showcasing female characters – often strong ones.

We have two of them this month, starting with an erotic shocker called *The Frightened Woman* (1969, Shameless Films). It's a fabulously twisted two-hander featuring a handsome company director who traps Maria in his luxury villa. He spends the first hour berating and degrading the talented journalist simply for being a woman. She is drugged, tied up and humiliated. At one point, he even forces her to have sex with a life-size mannequin… *of himself*. Yes, you need to brace for some unhinged sado-erotica here. Yet it's as intelligent as it is depraved, and often gorgeous in style and imagery. You'll quickly understand why Dagmar Lassander (Maria) calls this her finest role.

You need to brace for some unhinged sado-erotica here

We meet another powerful woman in *Mausoleum* (1983). Bobbie Bresee had been a busy guest star on shows like *The Love Boat*, *Charlie's Angels* and *The Fall Guy*, but here she's the star, playing Susan Nemod (read that surname backwards), a happily married 30-year-old… until an ancestral spirit sends her full-tilt bonkers. Suddenly, she's burning folks alive in exploding cars, then shagging the gardener and stabbing him with a hand rake. It's a hoot, especially when Susan levitates the worst actor on Earth over a shopping mall balcony, then rams him three floors onto a spike. Bresee is solid in a role that is both ridiculous and demanding. Marjoe Gortner plays her husband. This cult character actor started life as an evangelical child preacher. He made $3 million on the tent revival circuit, but his dad ran off with the money, so Marjoe pivoted into movies. In *Mausoleum*, he's thrilled when his wife develops an insatiable love of sex… but not so much when she squeezes him a little too hard in the bath. It's a sumptuous Blu-Ray with great extras and a lovely transfer. Tip: if you buy this directly from Treasured Films, they'll even throw in a 'Bitey Boob Demon' magnet since there's a scene where Susan's possessed breasts develop drooling fangs.

If people saw still images from these two films, they'd think horror treats women as objects. A *Mausoleum* poster features a sixth-form level drawing of a demon with pendulous breasts drooping over a tomb. *The Frightened Woman* has a female with tape across her mouth, or face down like a hunted bear, with a man standing on her back. Yet, if anybody takes the time to watch either, they'll find that even as far back as 1969, 'trash' films like these were some of the most ardent cheerleaders for female empowerment.

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WHY *FORTEAN*?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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LETTERS

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The next 50 years

The recent celebration of 50 years of *Fortean Times* provoked a number of personal reactions. It is an incredible achievement to keep any publication thriving over such a long period of time – especially in the fickle world of 'strange stuff'. *FT* has become, in what is perhaps a minor but nonetheless very real fashion, that most elusive of stations, a 'national treasure'.

Yet despite this, there is sometimes a whiff of the autumnal in the collective fortean air; Paul Lee's 'State of the Spectral Nation' [**FT437:38-41**] points towards a sense of decline in the reportage of ghosts; many articles and features look back at "the haunted generation" of the 1970s and 1980s (this is my generation and I love these articles), from public information shorts through to Arthur C Clarke and *Readers' Digest*; there is debate in the letters column about the possibility that 'science' relentlessly squeezes out the mysterious, reducing the scope of modern forteana.

This made me start to think about the next 50 years of *FT*. As a publication, *FT* has always been in the forefront of asking readers what they want in surveys and questionnaires. However, I suspect that many readers are, like me, children of the 1970s and 1980s and therefore very much inclined to favour articles covering these eras (I suspect this based mostly on my own preferences). The question therefore occurs: are we doing enough to engage a younger readership? Following that, might we be actively alienating that more youthful audience by increasing focus upon days gone by, however popular that may be with the current readers?

It seems to me that while *FT* appeals to me and to my generation, we should not be in the position of concern about the wonderful stories of our youth being questioned or 'explained' but should instead be looking at ways of investigating, in those parts of the magazine more detailed than 'Strange Days', issues of more concern to a potential younger readership.

None of this is intended as being in any way critical, but is hopefully a stimulus for our wonderfully creative and diverse readership to have more thoughts about securing a readership to take *FT* to 2073.

Anthony Wilkins
Rishworth, West Yorkshire

SIMULACRA CORNER

We can't remember who sent us this shouting cloud picture, but it's quite striking, isn't it?

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Cruel twist of fate

My parents, Dot and Sid, never really had much in life. Born to large working-class families in the 1930s, they were forced to leave school when they were 14. Dad became a farmworker and mum, before she had a family, briefly worked in a factory, but was forced to leave when she became engaged (those were the days!)

It wasn't until the mid-1960s that their house, where I was born and lived along with my parents and elder sister, was fitted with hot running water, an inside toilet and a bathroom. The dark old house never had a damp course and, as a result, was always cold and miserable. Income covered the basics, but clothes had to come mostly from jumble sales and we never had holidays and rarely went out.

Mum and dad dreamed of having a better life, so like many of their generation assiduously filled in a pools coupon every week in the hope that they might win big. Mum, who was educationally subnormal (sorry, I don't know what the PC term for that is nowadays), always used the same numbers every week.

Inevitably, the introduction of the National Lottery replaced the football pools, with mum again continuing to use the same set of numbers to try and hit the jackpot in this new game of chance.

On 26 November 1998, my parents' lives changed forever, when my father suffered a severely debilitating stroke, resulting in the loss of movement in the left side of his body. Mum cared for him until he died of heart failure in February 2003.

The only time my mum failed to fill in a lottery form was on the week of the stroke; she couldn't, because she had to spend most of the time beside dad in the hospital. And it was on that week that her numbers came up. "We would have been millionaires," she told me afterwards, although she wasn't in any way bitter, despite the fact that they really needed the money. However, not to be put off, the very next week, and up until the end of her life, she religiously continued playing the lottery, using the same numbers as she ever had.

Sometimes, life can be inordinately cruel.

Barry Cross
Ashford, Kent

The Enfield Poltergeist

Having read: 'The Poltergeist – Cases of Contagion' [**FT438:30-35**], and film review: 'Return to Green Street' [**FT439:60**], I thought I would inform you of the following. I am very good friends with a neighbour in our road. At the time of the reported strange happenings in Green Street, Enfield, he was a serving Metropolitan Police sergeant, based at Ponders End station. He told me that, at the beginning of the events at 284 Green Street, a policewoman was sent to the address. While there she apparently witnessed a chair move across the kitchen floor. She looked in vain for any wire, or means by which it could have been moved by human hand. For the sake of anonymity I refrain from mentioning their names.

RW Knight
By email

I was interested to see Daniel King's review of this AppleTV+ streaming series on *the Enfield Poltergeist* [**FT439:60**]. I spent some time recently researching Bill Wilkins, the purported source of the poltergeist phenomena, and successfully identified him, his age, cause of death and grave (which is not in the local cemetery). It appears the 'entity'

LETTERS

The Monster of Loch Ness
THE LAST DINOSAUR
THE LOCH NESS MONSTER
Inverness
Benham (A. Buckingham) Ltd., The Cover Shop, The Bayle, Folkestone, Kent

Celebrating Nessie

Like other whims of the imagination, the careers of cryptozoological creatures go through three phases. Firstly, there is a period of enthusiasm: the Monster of Loch Ness attracted widespread national publicity, and ambitious expeditions were launched to search for the creature, some of them using modern technology. A period of lethargy and scepticism ensued – not that old monster again! – although the creature still received firm support from the Inverness tourism authorities. As we see here, there were two nice rare first day covers featuring the Loch Ness Monster in 1991 and 2003. Sadly, neither of them was signed. The monster could hardly be expected to provide a signature, although the mayor of Inverness would have laboured under no such impediment, but instead the Scottish actor Richard Wilson, known for *One Foot in the Grave*, was persuaded to add his signature to a limited edition of the first of these covers.

Today, the Loch Ness Monster has been relegated to the 'funny pages' of the newspapers, even in its homeland of Scotland. The Inverness tourist office still holds the creature's banner high, albeit with less success than in the past. In August 2023, there was a [final?] ambitious search for the Loch Ness Monster, although the creature remained as elusive as ever [**FT437:4-5**]. "No S**t Sher-Loch – Global TV crews in search for Monster" wrote that irreverent newspaper, the *Scottish Sun*, making fun of the monster and the credulous enthusiasts attempting to find it.

Jan Bondeson *Dunbar, Scotland*

made a number of mistakes. To see an account of my investigation, including photographs of his grave, go to: xenophon.org.uk/enfieldpolt.html (Please ignore the hotlink to Operation Mincemeat– I can't easily remove it!)

Roger J Morgan
London

Leafy shelter

About Nigel Watson's paper on Celia Fisher's *The Story of Follies* [**FT436:52**]. *Folie* comes from *feuillée*, a shelter covered with *feuilles* (leaves), i.e. country house or cottage.

For example, *Rue de la Folie Regnaud*, in Paris, indicates that, once upon a time, there was a country house belonging to a gentleman called *Regnault* (when the area was still in the countryside). There may be a contamination with *folie* (madness) when the *feuillées* gradually became more and more luxurious and extravagant.

Francis Gandon
Paris

Nazis and UFOs

I was very interested to read SD Tucker's response to my criticism of the promotional article for his book [**FT437:68**]. I notice that he mentions the Horten 229 flying wing "Amerika Bomber" jet project in association with Kenneth Arnold's sighting as being a "myth". Well, that is of course an opinion, and one that I disagree with. The Horten brothers were not part of Operation Paperclip, but their superior – Siegfried Knemeyer, was. He was Head of Technical Development at The Reich Ministry of Aviation. He was awarded a permanent contract with the US Air Force – Air Materiel Command and was eventually granted the highest civilian honour that the US military could bestow – The Department of Defense Distinguished Civilian Service Award.

Combine that fact with the – admittedly only strongly rumoured – argument, that between 20 and 30 complete, but boxed up Horten 229s, *not* just the single one captured by the US military, were brought back for examination to the US, then I feel that there is a strong case to posit that what Arnold in fact actually saw, *was* a flight of adapted/improved Horten 229s, flying in formation, as they would do.

I understand, and appreciate what Mr Tucker says about not having the space to list all sections of his book, of course, but what I still disagree with is the cursory and casual way that he dismisses (or, as I haven't read his book, should I say – seemingly dismisses?) solid, and deeply strange facts, such as the Nazis keeping a whole army, so very late in the war, away from combat duties, and used for guarding purposes around the Owl Mountains in Lower Silesia, which is now part of Poland.

There were seven massive underground tunnel structures as part (part of, note, not *all* of) "Project Riese" (Giant), all of which were either back-filled by the Nazis, or, more interestingly, I think, by the Allies after discovery in 1945, at the end of hostilities in that area. Still largely back-filled today. The Wenceslas Mine of "Die Glock" conspiracy theory fame is but a small part of the overall complex.

The Nazis only ever went to such enormous trouble when they had something pretty scary to actually use! Think of

Mittelwerk, the underground facility for V1s and V2s. Ditto La Coupole and The Blockhaus D'Eperlecques.

Combine all the above with the fact that no one for sure knows exactly what happened to Obergruppenfuhrer Hans Kammler in the last days of the war, who was the overseer of *all* Top Secret "Wunderwaffe" – excepting his possible talks via a junior with the US Counterintelligence Corps with a view to becoming part of Operation Paperclip or, as some have suggested, The Soviet's Operation Osoaviakhim. In conclusion, I'm going to have to repeat myself: there is no smoke without fire! Except… in some cases?!

Mark Pearson
By email

SD Tucker replies …

I do just want to emphasise that Mr Pearson admits he hasn't actually read my book, just my article based on it, and my subsequent letters: if he had, he would understand that I don't completely dismiss Project Riese as a total fake or myth, just that it was nothing specifically to do with building flying saucers or Nazi UFOs. I detail how, as he correctly says, Hans Kammler was indeed involved in secret Wunderwaffen projects throughout the war, and that the Allies who (apparently) captured him did indeed pump him for info about these subjects; my point about his secret Project Riese operations is not that there was nothing whatsoever to them, but simply that they did not involve attempting to build Hitler a time-machine or spaceship, as subsequent stupid Internet rumours claim.

Some more plausible accounts say he was trying to develop a V-2-mounted radiological 'dirty bomb' missile there. Maybe so, nobody knows. Also, I don't specifically deny that what Kenneth Arnold saw that day in 1947 might have been some kind of secret US aircraft based on one or more captured Horten 229s – I don't know what his famous 'saucers' really were, but the fact they were broadly 'bat-wing'-like in shape, rather like the Hortens, makes this a reasonable enough guess. I just show how this fair enough assumption was then later abused to falsely imply Stalin and Dr Josef Mengele then used some back-engineered Hortens themselves to stage the alleged Roswell UFO crash.

All I debunk in my actual book itself is the specific myth of Nazi UFOs – i.e., German-built flying saucers/spaceships/flying time-machines – not the much more realistic Wunderwaffen projects Mr Pearson mentions. Really, if he actually reads the full thing, rather than just short edited extracts where many elements by necessity have to be dismissed in a "cursory and casual way" due to issues of space, this will soon become exceedingly obvious. Nonetheless, I thank him for allowing me to remind readers of my book's existence in the pages of FT once again! Perhaps it will now sell a few more copies – maybe even one to Mr Pearson himself this time?

Editorial note: this discussion is now closed

Newton, Magus

While I have some sympathy with David Hambling's complaint that nowadays there appears to be less weirdness in the world **[FT438:14]** I would have to disagree with his assertion that "The publication of… Newton's *Principia Mathematica* in 1687 was the starting point of the Scientific Revolution." Many better qualified than me have suggested that Newton was more the last true Magus than the first scientist (as we would understand that word now). Newton's primary interest was alchemy, on which he wrote more than a million words, conducting his own experiments which obviously held astrological components, as well as trying to establish a link between the precession of the equinoxes and the biblical account of the world – astrology again.

While all of this was going on his masterwork lay unpublished for some 20 years and came to be printed only at the insistence of the few who had read the manuscript. All of this is a matter of record, and while many might share Hambling's belief in the *Principia's* impact very few have read its remarkable Introduction which completely refutes the idea that actual 'forces' are involved in celestial mechanics.

Newton writes: *I likewise call attractions and impulses, in the same sense accelerative, and motive; and use the words attraction, impulse, or propensity of any sort towards a centre, promiscuously, and indifferently, one for another; considering those forces not physically but mathematically: wherefore the reader is not to imagine that by those words I anywhere take upon me to reason thereof, or that I attribute forces, in a true and physical sense, to certain centres (which are only mathematical points); when at any times I happen to speak of centres as attracting, or as endued with attractive powers.* (*Mathematical Principles*, translated and edited by Florian Cajori, University of California Press, 1960, p.5).

This is a far cry from how physicists understand his work today, and Newton's insistence that 'mathematical points' and not 'forces' dictate the nature of planetary movements is more in line with the astrological claim that the planets do not hold some conjectured physical influence, rather that their positions are indicative of the motion of events and their potential outcome. It would seem that some weirdness lurks even in the heart of the *Principia*.

Mike Harding
London

The Penyffordd polt

Stu Neville's television column discussing the BBC's *Paranormal: The Girl, the Ghost and the Gravestone*, about the Penyffordd Farm/Brother Doli case [**FT437:61**], includes presenter Sian Eleri's observation that Rose-Mary and David Gower were not Welsh speakers. This implied they could not have been responsible for the appearance of Welsh words in the house.

However, Michael Daniels, the psychologist responsible for investigating the case, states in his lengthy report, published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, that they owned a *Collins Gem Welsh Dictionary*, so the manufacture of Welsh words was not beyond them. Daniels also points out that words appeared in isolation, not in sentences which would be harder for a non-Welsh speaker to achieve convincingly.

He adds that spelling errors found in the wall writings would be unlikely to be made by a Welsh-speaker, but were consistent with a non-Welsh speaker possessing poorish eyesight misreading the dictionary's small font. He does not say so in the article but it can be seen from the programme that Rose-Mary Gower wore spectacles.

Sian Eleri knew all this because she had access to Dr Daniels's records, including his article in *JSPR*, a copy of which she can be seen holding in one shot (though any reference to the SPR is conspicuously absent in the programme). Yet she omitted to mention the possession of a Welsh dictionary, an important piece of evidence in assessing the wall writings.

In fact, there was much information missing necessary to reach a balanced conclusion, not least that David and Rose-Mary Gower had been SPR members and would therefore have had some knowledge of hauntings and poltergeists, useful to someone contemplating a hoax. Despite being structured as such, the programme was not a serious reinvestigation, and Penyffordd Farm, billed in the publicity as "the most haunted house in Britain", did not live up to the hype.

Tom Ruffles
Impington, Cambridge

Custer's last strand

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

A Cumbrian elf resort

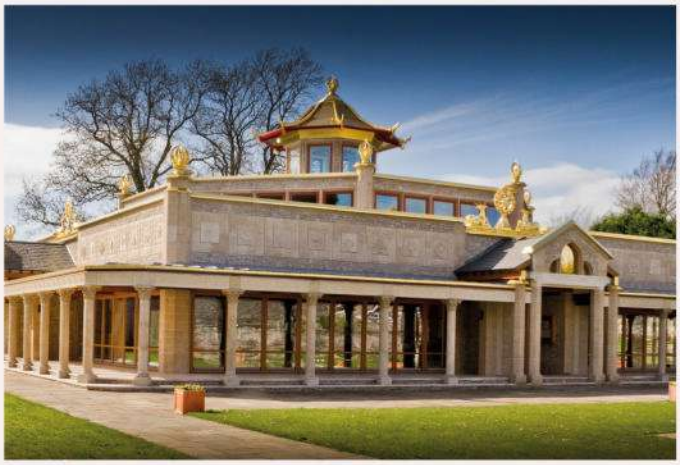
I'm not in the habit of hearing voices in my head, let alone striking up a dialogue with them; but if someone is trying to strike up a conversation, surely it's only courteous to at least bend an ear before walking away. That's what I told myself in a coffee shop in Cumbria in 1998, anyway.

There is of course a preamble. I had taken a friend and her two children to visit the Manjushri Kadampa Buddhist Centre near Ulverston, as she had made several retreats there and claimed to have experienced astral travel while camping in the grounds. So the place had some significant memories for her, and when we arrived, I left them to wander around while I went into the café.

The main building at that time was a 19th century Gothic mansion built on the site of a mediæval Augustinian house founded in the 12th century as a hospital for the poor; the priory didn't survive the Reformation, and the buildings didn't survive the subsequent owners. The current building has had a chequered history involving owner bankruptcies, and has taken on roles such as a miners' convalescent home and a spa hotel (when it even had a railway station on its grounds). The Manjushri Kadampa Buddhist sect took it over in 1976 and in the late 1990s built the Kadampa Temple for World Peace alongside the existing buildings.

I passed into the centre's entrance lobby, where stood a Buddha statue that caught my attention – it seemed an 'animated' statue, in a sense, and the face was unusual, I thought, for a Buddha, quite thin and leathery-looking despite the gold. Or at least that's how I saw it. It made quite a good impression on me, even though I wasn't a Buddhist.

I passed into the café and ordered a coffee, and sat down with a book to wait for my friend. That was when the sub-vocalisation that's always running around my brain seemed to take on a different character and made me take notice. As I say, I've not much experience in hearing voices, but I am, I hope, ready should a bona fide discarnate entity want to set up an avenue of communication, if only for character assessment. After all, in the Middle Ages Oberon was said to be broadly friendly and ready to communicate with human travellers – but the friendliness evaporated if he was ignored or treated with disrespect, and he would then engineer storms and befuddlement for the arrogant human. Chatty discarnate entities aren't exactly a frequent or regular occurrence for me, either, although my sometimes-inspired sometimes-bonkers friend was very much into such experiences; anyway, I wasn't going to take a chance as we were miles from home.



This being was a kind of genius loci of the old priory site who had been there for ages

The opening gambit was quite direct: "Oh, you noticed me then!" My response, understandably, to myself more than the voice, was "Eh?" And the voice – unheard, but expressing itself in osmotic sentences, as it were, responded something like, "The statue – that's of me, quite a good likeness actually". My response was "Ummm... and you might be?" And then I was hooked into an exchange I could, and still can, barely credit.

The gist of it was that this being was a kind of *genius loci* of the old priory site who'd been there for ages, living in a big old tree in the grounds – he (definitely he) told me our idea of 'elf' would near enough describe him. He liked these Buddhists, he said, they were a bit different from a lot of the tenants before them and they respected him. They'd left a patch of wild garden for him, and he liked that, and he liked the people who came visiting and camping, and he liked the way his features had been slipped into the statue (and at that point an image flashed into my head of a thin brown leathery face, indeed similar to the statue). Anyway, he said, come out and see me while you're here, and went quiet. I was left mulling over this conversation and jotting notes as I finished my coffee. I wished I'd asked him for his name...

I went outside to look around, and round a corner of the house was a patch of garden that had been left minimally tended, evidently the 'elf's' wild garden, and just beyond it was a big old tree in a clearing. As I approached it, the 'voice' came back – "Hello, you've found me then!" My friend and kids were on the edge of the clearing; we stood together under the tree, which had apparently been for her the trigger for the astral travels of previous visits, and talked generally, including about the many coins that had been pressed into the soft bark. I was aware as we talked of my discarnate contact listening in, and then of the two kids pulling coins out of the bark. For the tree's own health I wouldn't perhaps have objected to this, but suddenly and simultaneously in unison, without any eye contact, both my friend and I shouted "Leave those coins alone!" The kids were rather taken aback, looked at each of us wide-eyed – and started putting the coins back into the bark! Afterwards, the three of them moved off to the path through the woods to the shore.

I lingered for a few moments to express a thought to the 'elf' about how he seemed to rather like this coin-tree custom. The reply came back and changed the timbre of our communications. It explained that they were offerings to him, and shouldn't be abstracted, and added "The little girl still has some of the money, it's in her left coat pocket, about 13p. If she doesn't bring it back, she'll have an accident". I expressed surprise, and he repeated his point: "They've got to learn respect, they've been given to my tree". "I'll have a word," I thought, and moved after them. I caught up with little R, and casually asked her if she still had some coins from the tree; she looked at me, ready to shake her head, and I said "in your left pocket, about 13p?". Her eyes widened, she said nothing, but put her hand into her left pocket and pulled out thirteen pennies. I told her that the tree spirit was a bit upset that she'd taken them and would like them back, and she promised to do so. And I wandered off on my own again.

Later, I was sitting by the wild garden and looking towards the tree when they came back from the shore, and I was pleased to see the little girl come straight into the clearing and head for the tree, obviously to put the coins back as she'd promised. But when she got near the tree, she tripped over a root and went sprawling. Nothing unpleasant and no harm done, but my impression was that the elf was making its point, issuing an advisory.

As we left, I brought my friend up to date on what had been going on. She was in no way surprised, and reckoned that the elf spirit must have seen a kindred spirit in me, as an animist.

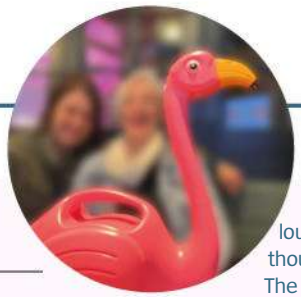
Maybe, but for me the main thing was that this was an episode that could not be shrugged off easily; I had (and still have) no medical history that might contribute to it, and I knew it had to be written up while fresh

and taken seriously. I felt that I could no longer be quite as intellectually ambivalent about the possibility of "other species" as I had been previously. I also noted how the atmosphere around the big tree was strong, and seemed to have attracted visitors to make offerings as well as fuel my friend's psychic journeying. And the third takeaway was that these beings may be amoral in our terms, but are not necessarily without principles – if you contravene their value system they have no compunction about getting back at you, even if you are a five-year-old girl, in order to maintain their prerogative.

A few years later I was talking with someone who had lived in a Kadampa centre for about five years, and I told him my story. I knew there had long been friction with the Mahayana tradition, whom I understood had accused Kadampa of worshipping demons. Not quite, said my friend (note this is only my friend's comment; I know very little of Kadampa and hope it does not do an injustice to their tradition). They are prepared to work with beings of lesser spiritual planes, which can be mischievous and can cause imbalance; and for that reason he had moved on. He guessed that the Coniston Priory entity may have been such a lower-order spirit being given too much energy by the centre and by the people who were meditating under it, and suggested the energy might not be very good for actual magical or spiritual progress. Interesting point, particularly for a Buddhist. Nonetheless I valued my bizarre experience, and it certainly taught me something impossible to forget.

In 2016, finding myself in the area, I dropped in again. The statue in the lobby seemed very ordinary this time, and no voices interrupted my coffee. The big tree in the clearing was very obviously in poor health, and there was no longer an atmosphere. My elf informant was clearly no longer in residence.

John Billingsley
Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire



Carry On smoking and haunting

In reference to Matthew Thorley's letter about Carry On favourites Kenneth Williams and Charles Hawtrey's deaths having paranormal postscripts [**FT440:61**], I'd like to add a third sneaky spirit.

In 2015, I was asked by the editor of a London magazine called *Journal* if I would like to photograph actress Fenella Fielding for a feature. Though I was familiar with many of the *Carry On* films, *Carry On Screaming* was one I'd never seen; and having grown up in Canada, I had been unaware of Fenella's delightful voice and inimitable manner – not to mention her iconic status, despite how few really juicy and memorable characters she'd had the chance to portray in film or television.

Of course, Fenella Fielding was an intoxicating and somewhat mysterious character. Even at 89, the year before her death, she retained her sultry sense of mischief. I had photographed her to celebrate her OBE, but sadly she passed away not long after.

Fast forward to Spring 2022. I had ordered a takeaway from the Leon restaurant on Carnaby Street late one night and was leaving the premises, when two ladies stopped me to ask if I'd name their newly acquired pink flamingo watering can, proudly displayed on their table. I stopped, thinking this was a strange request, then saw the fabulously camp flamingo and immediately thought "Fenella!"

The lady who had asked seemed utterly shocked: "Why would you choose that name? I mean, it's so uncommon!" I explained, "Well, I was Fenella Fielding's photographer for the last few years of her life…"

She replied, astonished: "*My name* is Fenella… my father was obsessed with Fenella Fielding. I was named after her!"

This moment of synchronicity was for all three of us truly unbelievable. I mean, honestly, what are the chances?

I walked home and called up Fenella's manager, Simon, recounting the story – and his reply took this synchronicity to another level.

"Fenella and I would often eat at that very Leon!" he told me. Well, I'll concede that part of the continued coincidence sounds rather less spectacular… but what came next made me wonder: Had Fenella's ghost been wandering theatreland waiting to deliver a last bit of spectral mischief?

Simon finished:"At her wake, one artist who had been planned for the performance was Marc Almond, but he was unable to join us as he was touring abroad." The song Marc would have performed at Fenella's memorial, according to Simon? *Pretty Flamingo* by Manfred Mann.

Etienne Gilfillan
Art Director, Fortean Times
London

Pyramid building

I have enjoyed reading the many articles celebrating FT's first 50 years (for which belated congratulations). David Hambling's survey of the 'retreat' of von Danikenesque theories about ancient mysteries in the light of better scientific explanations was excellent [**FT438:14**]. But, on the subject of the Great Pyramid, I don't think the discovery of 'workers' cemeteries' from which bones have been recovered, showing injuries associated with hauling huge stone blocks, has entirely solved the mysteries associated with its construction. Aliens may not have built the Great Pyramid, but we still can't explain the incredible precision with which it was laid out and built, especially as this was at the very outset of (according to orthodox science) civilised life on this planet. No one can agree on the methods used, e.g. external ramps, internal ramps, block and tackle etc. all of which throw up additional problems.

Furthermore, megaliths weighing up to 200 tonnes were used in the nearby mortuary temples, and it is not known exactly how these could have been put into place. The space limitations involved mean that relatively few workers could have been deployed to move them, and it has been argued that even today, with modern technology and equipment, such edifices would be incredibly difficult to construct.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

Origin of skin colour

Re the skin colour myth told to Dave Miles by a schoolfriend in Africa long ago [**FT436:59**] and confirmed by Grant Hutchison [**FT439:69**]: I read a version of this myth in an American "cowboy" annual in 1962 when I was about 12 or 13. It was attributed to an Amerindian folk tale, told to white settlers travelling across the prairies.

The Great Spirit made mankind from clay, but left them too long baking. On seeing his error, he made a lake and told the humans to bathe in the waters to correct the mistake. The first group made much of the waters by jumping in and swimming about, and became white. They were too greedy. The next group found less water, so splashed their bodies and became the 'Redskins'. When they were done only a thin layer of water covered the lakebed so that the last group could only wet the soles of their feet and palms of their hands – and remained black.

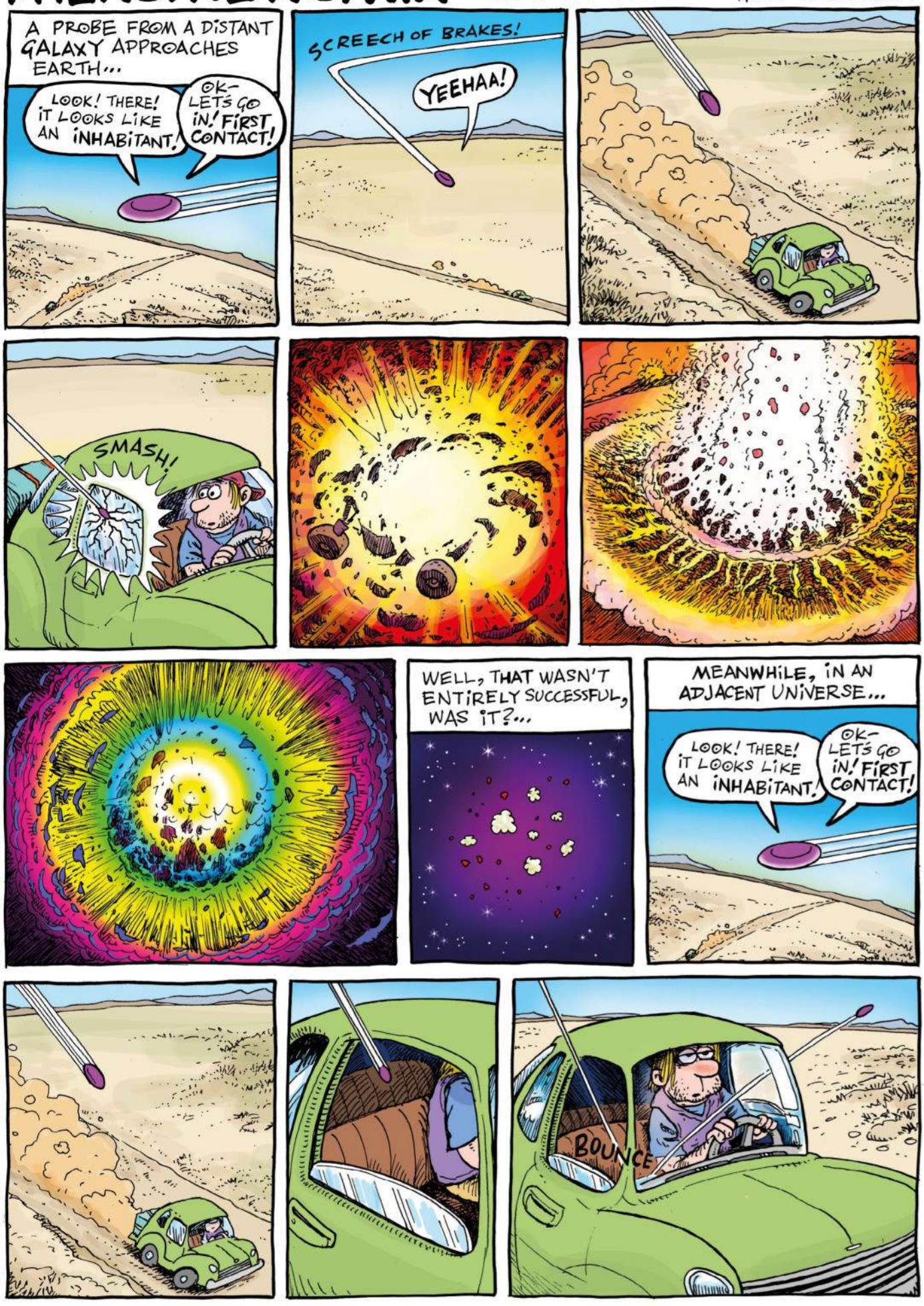
The Great Spirit was unhappy with the first group's selfishness and sent them away to a less pleasant land to live; pitying the black people, he sent them to a land where life would not be too hard for them. The 'Redskins' were the only group to achieve his desired result, so they were given the land of the prairie, with abundant buffalo to hunt, rivers and lakes to fish, and wild cereals to harvest.

JW Gardiner
Cumberauld, Glasgow

PHENOMENOMIX

FIRST CONTACT

HUNT EMERSON


A PROBE FROM A DISTANT GALAXY APPROACHES EARTH...
LOOK! THERE! IT LOOKS LIKE AN INHABITANT.
OK- LETS GO IN! FIRST CONTACT!
SCREECH OF BRAKES!
YEEHAA!
SMASH!
WELL, THAT WASN'T ENTIRELY SUCCESSFUL, WAS IT?...
MEANWHILE, IN AN ADJACENT UNIVERSE...
LOOK! THERE! IT LOOKS LIKE AN INHABITANT.
OK- LETS GO IN! FIRST CONTACT!
BOUNCE

A FURIOUS MEETING OF THE UNITED NATIONS...
HATE!
SHOUT!
FURY!
YELL!
ARGUE!
HATE!
INSULT!
ARGUE!
SHOUT!
YELL!
ANGER!
GREETINGS! WE BRING PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP AND UNITY TO YOUR PLANET AND ITS PEOPLE!
HAPPY!
PEACE!
FRIEND!
LOVE!
JOY!
PEACE!
HAPPY
FRIEND!
JOY!
SMILE!
PEACE
LOVE!
HAPPY!
YES!
JOY!
MEANWHILE, IN YET ANOTHER UNIVERSE - -THIS ONE IS OURS...
IT LOOKS LIKE AN INHABITANT.
IN! FIRST CONTACT.
CHEW CHEW
PLOP
JELLY BEANS
JELLY BEANS
CHOMP!

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE DEVIL'S DOMAIN

A 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN POLTERGEIST CASE

THE WILD MEN OF METAL

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FORTEAN TIMES 442
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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

After postwoman Olga Leontyeva, 32, did not return from work in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on 24 July 2023, her worried relatives reported her missing, triggering an intensive search. However, she was not found for another three days, when her body was discovered in a lift stuck at the top of a nine-storey tower block. CCTV footage shows Leontyeva entering the lift and going to the top floor with the mail, shortly before a power cut caused the lift to fail. The alarm did not work, and no one heard her cries for help. The Tashkent General Prosecutor's Office found that the lift had been suffering regular technical problems and that breakdowns were "common" and has launched a criminal investigation into Leontyeva's death. *thesun.co.uk, 31 Jul 2023*.

A Chinese social media influencer known as "Sanqiange" (meaning "Brother Three Thousand") died after taking part in on online challenge known as "PK" with other influencers. The challenge, which was streamed live on Sanqiange's Douyin channel – a Chinese version of TikTok – involved one-on-one competitions between influencers to win rewards and gifts from viewers, with punishments for the losers. In Sanqiange's case this involved downing at least three bottles of Baijiu, a powerful Chinese spirit with a typical alcohol content of between 30 and 60 per cent. "I don't know how much he had consumed before I tuned in, but in the latter part of the video, I saw him finish three bottles before starting on a fourth," said a viewer named Zhao. The death of Sanqiange, whose real name was Wang, is one of the incidents that has prompted China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism to ban "31 misbehaviours by live streamers" including "encouraging users to interact in vulgar ways". *editions.cnn.com, 28 May 2023*.

During a routine rubbish collection in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, sanitation workers were startled by a gunshot. Although failing to spot a gunman they realised that one of their team had been hit and was lying on the sidewalk. The 40-year-old man was rushed to the nearby Rioverde Medical Center, but died of a gunshot wound. Investigations found that there had not, in fact, been anyone attacking the sanitation workers; instead, a rubbish bag the victim had thrown into the truck had contained a loaded pistol and the impact had caused it to fire. The gun's barrel was unfortunately pointing at the man's chest, so he was in the immediate firing line and sustained fatal injuries. In Veldhoven, in the Netherlands, a gun was not needed. There, a 62-year-old sanitation worker died after being dragged into a waste disposal truck and getting compressed along with the rubbish. *paudal.com, 16 Oct; nos.nl, 13 Sept 2023.*

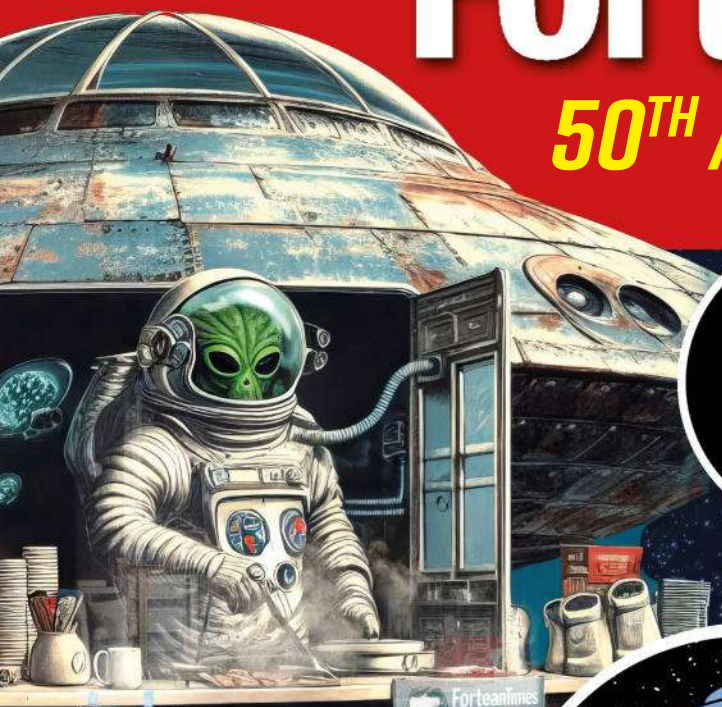
A technician in his 40s working for a robot manufacturer in South Korea was killed by one of their machines when working on the sensors of a new system designed to lift boxes of peppers and transfer them to pallets at the Donggoseong Export Agricultural Complex. The technician had left the system switched on and it mistook him for one of the cartons of vegetables, grabbed him, and crushed his head and chest against the conveyor belt, with fatal consequences. *bbc.co.uk/news, 8 Nov 2023*.

Following death by cheese (**FT437:72**), the Italian food industry has now suffered a death by wine. At the Ca'di Rajo winery in Treviso in northern Italy, Marco Bettolini, 46, and his colleague Alberto Pin, 31, were cleaning out a recently emptied prosecco processing tank when Bettolini noticed that his colleague had collapsed. Betollini attempted to climb into the tank to rescue Pin, but fell, fatally striking his head on the side of the tank. Neither man had been wearing breathing apparatus or protective harnesses and were overcome by the carbon dioxide remaining in the tank after the fermentation process. The fire brigade managed to haul them out, but while nothing could be done for Bettolini, Pin was still breathing and was placed in an induced coma in hospital to aid his recovery, which at the time of reporting hung in the balance.

Shortly after, a similar tragedy struck in Spain. Gerardo Jubera, 60, was checking on the fermentation of a vat of Rioja at the Crespo Zabala Winery in Lanciego, when he too was overcome by carbon dioxide and toppled into the tank. His brother-in-law Felix Crespo tried to help, but also fell in after breathing the gas. Both men died and a third needed hospital treatment after inhaling the fumes. *metro.co.uk, 19 Sept; Sun, 5 Oct 2023*.

ForteanTimes

50TH ANNIVERSARY MERCHANDISE



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